

I don't know about you but I'm fairly hopeless when people ask me what my favourite things are. You know the sort of question;

- what's your favourite colour or.
- what's your favourite film or TV show,
- which country would you really love to visit,
- what's your favourite restaurant or type of food
- who's your favourite musician

They're often the sort of questions you get asked when you're on a first date so maybe my incompetence in this respect explains why I'm still single!

Then in Christian circles someone might ask you what your favourite Bible verse is. Funnily enough the last two times that I've been asked to preach the gospel passages that I've been given have included verses that almost certainly would appear in many people's top 10 list.

Last time my gospel text was John chapter 3 which includes verse 16 'for God so loved the world that He gave His only Son that all who believe in Him should not perish but have eternal life'. Today in Matthew Chapter 11 we have verses 28 to 30 'come to me all you that are weary and are carrying heavy burdens and I will give you rest. Take my yoke upon you and learn from me for I am gentle and humble in heart and you will find rest for your souls; for my yoke is easy and my burden is light.'

It's no surprise that these verses are such favourites because they are beautiful not only as they represent a true, certain and wonderful promise from Jesus our Lord, but beautiful also in the imagery that they project; the promise 'come to me and I will give you rest' leading to the feeling that as you come into Jesus' presence, your shoulders can drop so that you can put down all your worries and you let out a big relaxing sigh ... sorted!

Jesus' words to describe himself are that he is 'gentle and humble in heart' so there is the wonder of knowing that the one to whom we come, the one who is making this promise of rest is gentle, humble in heart, welcoming, accepting, not judgmental, not harsh, not burdensome not super critical. How wonderful to know that this is the character of Jesus our Lord.

And yet..... And yet.... You see I've been reflecting on these verses quite a bit recently. The truth is that I have found them rather troubling rather than comforting. After all how can Jesus claim that His yoke is easy and that His burden is light? Jesus, the one who was betrayed by a close friend, abandoned by the rest of his followers, ridiculed by the crowd, falsely accused, sentenced for having committed no crime, physically, mentally, and psychologically abused, put to death in the most painful way, His dying words 'My God my God, Why have you forsaken me?' revealing the total anguish of seemingly being abandoned by God the Creator, His rock, His certainty. How can this all be easy or light?

And yet.. And yet... how can this promise be true in our world where we see continuing terrible inequality of wealth and of opportunity, racial gender and sexual discrimination, growing fear and anxiety over our livelihoods, our jobs, our children's education, the

environment and most recently, an experience of lockdown for many, including myself, which has resulted in increased isolation, loneliness, suspicion of others and unnerving uncertainty about what our future might bring. The fact that we may be Christians and have a deep faith in God hasn't necessarily protected us from many or all of these concerns. So, once again how can all this be easy or light?

And yet... And yet.... even the context in which Jesus says these words is troubling and perhaps confusing. At the start of our gospel reading Jesus criticises the Israelites for their attitude towards him. He highlights their fickleness, in truth, if we're honest it's the same with us. How often want God simply to play to our tune and not God's. And when we've got what we wanted, off we go on our merry way without a further thought of true thankfulness. So how can Jesus criticize in one breath and then invite us to enter into His rest, a deep rest for our souls in the next?

All very confusing, perhaps. Nevertheless, this is a direct promise of Jesus, who within it very strikingly invites us to learn from him. And so it's something that we should not only take very seriously but also expect to be fulfilled. How do we unlock this promise? How do we learn from our Saviour who is gentle and humble in heart? How do we find rest for our souls, today, tomorrow, every day, rather than assuming this rest is a vague hope for our future?

The Psalm that we heard before the Gospel, Psalm 73 may give us some clues as to how we might enter into that rest. I love the psalms because the writers are brutally honest about how they feel, and you see the whole range of human emotion in them. Many, like this one contain disturbing images of violence and destruction, which we, in our modern world find unacceptable. For today, let's put those images to one side (maybe a sermon topic for the more eminent theologians amongst us in due course) and look at the transformation that the Psalmist experiences throughout these verses. They start (and for much of the Psalm go on) feeling dejected because they look around and see the rich, the seemingly ungodly living fat, luscious lives whilst they are troubled to the core. But by the end they are able to say 'It is good for me to be near God. I have made the Lord God my refuge to tell of all your works'.

What has affected the transformation? There are a number of things to note, I think. The psalmist starts by talking to God, putting themselves in God's presence; maybe an obvious thing to say but one which shouldn't be overlooked. And then as they are talking to God, being brutally honest about what they feel. Not sugar coating their conversation with God in middle class niceties or false gaiety and praise. After all God knows us, God knows the aches of our hearts and God wants us to be open and honest.

This honesty leads the psalmist (eventually, it takes 22 verses of the 28) to realise what a blessing it is for them to be in the presence of God v 23 'Nevertheless I am continually with you'. That to be in God's presence is far better than any material pleasure enjoyed by those around them. That knowing God, knowing that God is walking with them every step of the way is the truly best thing ever.

'You hold me by my right hand, you guide me with your counsel, and afterwards receive me with honour. Whom have I in heaven but you? And there is nothing on earth I desire other than you. My flesh and my heart may fail but God is my strength and my portion for ever.'

And in this way, God works a major transformation. By putting themselves in the presence of God, even in a foul mood and full of complaints, God works in the heart of the Psalmist to enable them to grow in their understanding of what is good, what is best. To be with God, to know God to praise and worship God, as God intended us to be.

So for the Psalmist no more 'And yet.....' And for us, as we respond to Jesus' invitation, 'Come unto me' with open honest hearts, as we put ourselves in the presence of our Saviour, Jesus our gentle and humble Lord transforms our minds and our hearts to wonder at the majesty, justice, faithfulness, grace, mercy and kindness of our God.

Our 'And yet...' turns into an 'And so.....'

And so, let us let us come to Jesus, weary and heavy laden, let us take His yoke on us and let us find rest in the presence of our gentle and humble Lord. And let Him refresh our souls.

Amen.