

5 July 2020

Genesis 24:34-38, 42-49, 58-67

Romans 7:15-25a

Matthew 11:16-19, 25-30

I remember that when I led a Christian fellowship at university, I found myself having to defend one of our fellowship members who had been rounded upon by other members over what kind of music she liked to listen to. For them her enjoyment of contemporary pop music called into question whether she really was Christian or not. This was despite her deep faithfulness in prayer, and the gentle way she had of sharing her faith with those around her. For the other members, the secular music was a big thing, and the manner of their challenge to her was so zealous it was nasty and deeply hurtful.

It seems that all too often in the life of the Church we can find ourselves causing offence, or having our faith or practice called into question, because we don't meet someone's expectations.

Jesus said,

“To what can I compare this generation? They are like children sitting in the marketplaces and calling out to others:

“We played the pipe for you,

and you did not dance;

we sang a dirge,

and you did not mourn.’

For John came neither eating nor drinking, and they say, ‘He has a demon.’

The Son of Man came eating and drinking, and they say, ‘Here is a glutton and a drunkard, a friend of tax collectors and sinners.’”

The point is that in the very different ministries of both John and Jesus *God* was at work. We do well to be careful least we end up trying to conform the work of God in and through others to our own expectations.

It is not as if expectations or rules are unimportant. But a big problem arises when they get disconnected from their purpose, disconnected from the overarching goal.

Beyond this surface, but nevertheless important, point lies another deeper truth.

In Matthew 11, Jesus has been responding to questions about the ministry of John the Baptist. It was a ministry that looked quite unlike his own. It challenged the preconceptions and preoccupations of the religious leaders of the time, because John called Israel to repentance in readiness for the new reign of God coming among them. The call to repentance is confronting if you think that keeping the religious rules your community has devised has kept you in the right with God; and announcement of the coming of the kingdom of *God* is deeply troubling when you've thrown your lot behind other causes and powers.

But as much as the leaders of the people opposed the ministry of John, they also didn't like the ministry of Jesus. His approach was completely different to that of John – no hair-shirted existence for him, Jesus celebrates and foreshadows life in the kingdom of heaven with all and sundry, throwing parties which speak of God's lavish, generous, inclusive love and forgiveness. But this too challenged the preconceptions and preoccupations of the religious leaders of the time, because he associated with those most in need of, and perhaps therefore most open to, his healing, restoring, forgiving, redeeming work; and because he announced that in him the kingdom of God was in fact present. Associating with the least, last, and lost is deeply confronting if you believe that it is the privileged who enjoy the favour of God; and the presence of the reign of God in the person of his Son is alarming if you've pledged your allegiance to the rule of another.

Jesus perfectly reveals the God the Father. But this revelation also reveals the hearts of those whom the revelation is directed.

So Jesus, who announces and embodies the joy of the heavenly banquet that God is making available to any who would respond, regardless of status, finds himself accused of being "a glutton and a drunkard". These words recall Deuteronomy 21. There Moses warns the Israelites to beware of a rebellious son. Such a son will bring evil on Israel, and so his parents must bring him to the elders and have them put him to death. The commandment in Deuteronomy instructs the parents of such a

son to accuse him in a particular way. 'This son of ours', they must say, 'is stubborn and rebellious. He will not obey us. He is a glutton and a drunkard.' And then the people are to stone him to death.

The accusation the people make of Jesus is not just that he likes parties. It is that he is like a rebellious son, a threat to Israel. And in the background there is this connotation of that the appropriate consequence is the death penalty.

Of course, if we're honest, we know that we often struggle with trying to obey the perceived expectations and rules, even the good commandments of God. Most of us would identify at some level, at some time in our life, with Paul's heartrending deep struggle:

For I do not do the good I want to do, but the evil I do not want to do – this I keep on doing. ...

Although I want to do good, evil is right there with me. ...

(And as this resonates within us, perhaps then, when we find ourselves looking down on others, we might then remember that we all share in the common human problem and share in being in need of God's mercy. *We all* come as little children before our loving heavenly Father.)

While we find ourselves identifying with the inward struggle Paul describes, the reassurance that comes from his sharing this experience with us only gets us so far. "What a wretched man I am! Who will rescue me from this body that is subject to death?"

Thankfully God has provided the solution, and it actually lies behind Paul's words in Romans 7 and it lies within the very nation from which came the religious leaders who were subject to Jesus' challenging words. God's solution lies within a small and fragile nation of people he called to himself – the descendants of Isaac and Rebekah.

Rather than Romans 7 being a purely personal reflection, it seems that Paul is using the “I” language as a rhetorical device; perhaps also alluding to well-known sayings from pagan moralists about the weakness of the human will.<sup>1</sup> And Paul is looking back, as a Christian, at Israel under the Law, the Torah. Israel was right to embrace and celebrate Torah: it is God’s Law, it is holy and just and good. The Law was God’s gift to Israel. But Israel is also still, in Paul’s words, “in Adam”. Israel, like all peoples, is innately sinful. The Law performs a good function in making Israel aware of sin. But it does not save Israel from sin. The existence of the Law cannot overthrow sin’s power – this is the futile battle depicted in the passage we heard read. Paul’s diagnosis is that Israel is wretched as a result.

But he doesn’t stop with diagnosis. Still using the rhetorical “I” Paul sets out what the necessary treatment is:

Who will rescue me from this body that is subject to death? Thanks be to God, who delivers me through Jesus Christ our Lord!

If we were to follow Paul’s argument through into chapter 8, we would find that the Law’s condemnation has in fact finally fallen on the spiritual power of sin itself – not on the sinners – and that this condemnation has happened through the death of Jesus. The Law has enabled sin to be heaped up on Israel, so that in Israel’s King and representative it could be destroyed.

For what the law was powerless to do because it was weakened by the flesh, God did by sending his own Son in the likeness of sinful flesh to be a sin offering. And so he condemned sin in the flesh, in order that the righteous requirement of the law might be fully met in us, who do not live according to the flesh but according to the Spirit. (Romans 8:3-4)

Paul has been having to deal with a particular problem. He has been addressing the Jewish people, the descendants of Israel, with their particular history with God, and their particular understanding of their place in God’s purposes. And he has been having to address them with the good news of Jesus. The challenge he has had to

---

<sup>1</sup> Just who is the “I” in Romans 7 has occasioned a great deal of debate among Bible scholars and theologians. As an indication of this, Stott’s one volume commentary on Romans devotes 10 pages to this discussion.

face has been to explain how God's promises to Israel hold true but have now been brought to fruition in the work of Jesus Christ and extended to all peoples.

For us, brought up on this side of Jesus' life, death and resurrection, brought up outside of Israel's self-understanding, this might all seem a bit remote. But Romans has good news for everyone.

The good news is that eternal life in Christ Jesus our Lord is God's gift to us. It is God's free gift; it is not something we earn by our own efforts or deserve because of who we are or what we have done. A free gift.

We need this gift, all of humankind needs this free gift, to rescue us from sin. In humankind's rebellion, we have given ourselves over to the spiritual powers in opposition to God; we have enabled them; we have surrendered our God-given authority as kings and priests to them; and we have given them power over us. Sin, rebellion against God's perfect purpose for humankind, leads to death: as Paul says in Romans 6:23, the wages of sin is death.

We need this free gift of God's mercy, because left to our own devices we find ourselves enslaved to sin. But through the work of Jesus Christ on the cross, in his dying and rising again, we are given a new status – we become slaves of God. Our status, or standing, is changed by Christ's obedient death: it's like as slaves our ownership has been transferred; we were under the ownership of sin, and now we're under God's ownership. Yes, we still wage war with sin in our lives – but it no longer owns us.

Jesus issues an invitation which is ultimately to *all* people, not just to Israel.

And it is an invitation filled with grace, it is a gift:

Come to me, all you who are weary and burdened, 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.

Jesus stands alongside the ungodly, the gluttons and drunkards, the outcasts and sinners, all of us. Rather than having us weighed down by the yoke of law's demands disconnected from their purpose, Jesus stands alongside us and he bears our condemnation – this is what makes his yoke easy and burden light.

These are comfortable words, words of comfort, words of assurance. God, in Jesus Christ, loves us and welcomes us into his embrace. He bears the condemnation for our sinfulness. In this sense these words truly belong where they are placed in our New Zealand Prayer Book 404 liturgy: leading us into confession. We come to confess knowing that we do so to the one who has already paid the penalty for our sin.

In the Book of Common prayer these Comfortable Words *follow* the Absolution. This prompts another thought: What is it we do as a *result* of being assured of our pardon? Surely one answer is that we, confident in our assurance of God's pardon, commit ourselves to fulfilling his purpose for humankind, taking his love and forgiveness into the world around us?

So may these comfortable words also be comfortable in that old sense intended in the Book of Common Prayer; may they be 'strengthening, supporting, encouraging, inspiriting'.

Jesus said "My yoke is easy and my burden is light." However, his promise to us is not *comfortable* in the modern sense of a fluffy pillow. We are called into the uncomfortable business of Jesus among the sinners and outcasts, drunkards and tax collectors, helping the world to see that in Jesus the kingdom of God is present. We are comforted in the sense of being strengthened and reassured in the knowledge that we do that work *with him*, yoked to the world's true King, and equipped by the power of his Holy Spirit.

What better assurance could there be?

**Works consulted**

- Wright, *Matthew for Everyone: Part 1, chapters 1-15*
- Wright, *Twelve Months of Sundays: Reflections on Bible readings, Year A*
- Stott, *The Message of Romans*, IVP BST
- Byrne, *Romans* [Sacra Pagina vol. 6]

- Ziesler, J. A. *Paul's Letter to the Romans*. [TPI New Testament Commentaries]
- Anglicans Online, 20 March 2011, <http://morgue.anglicansonline.org/110320/>
- Margaret Bullitt-Jonas, "Comfortable Words", <http://www.holyhunger.com/sermons/message20080706.php>
- Wright, *The Day the Revolution Began*