

# Rest For The Weary

## Inappropriate Expectations

### Introduction

You do not need me to tell you Christianity is not a ‘cool’ religion in the public sphere. It is generally acceptable for someone to openly believe just about anything, or follow any sort of religious code, and they will be tolerated. Admit that you’re a Christian, though, and you will often be dismissed as “out of touch”, “intolerant”, “archaic”, and increasingly we are being accused of being “immoral”.

There are certainly a lot of reasons for this —too many to go over right now. One of the reasons is that the Bible can often be quite perplexing. It is a book of paradox, where seemingly contradictory statements are often juxtaposed so as to reveal essential truth: “Let anyone who has ears listen.” (Mt 11:15)<sup>1</sup>

Today’s gospel reading is certainly no exception. What in the world was Jesus talking about when he compared the people of his generation to children playing flutes and dancing? What about when he tells them that the cities of Tyre and Sodom will be better off than they at the final judgment? Didn’t Sodom get destroyed by fire from the sky for its deplorable wickedness?

I am not surprised to read that people then, as they do now, responded with uncertainty and doubt to Jesus’ paradoxical statements. However, I have discovered for myself that Jesus is, without any doubt, “the way, the truth, and the life” (Jn 14:6), just as he claimed. I have come to agree with the apostle Peter, when he stated Jesus has “the words of eternal life ... you are the Holy One of God” (Jn 6:68-69). Therefore, I believe that in the seeming complexity of his words and teachings, a simple gospel is proclaimed and accessible to all.<sup>2</sup>

### The Questions of the Text

Today’s reading from *The Gospel of Matthew* reveals Jesus’ identity was called into question by the people of his time and place. As we read his words, and encounter his teaching, our own identity, as friends of Jesus, is likewise called into question and challenged. Let us hear the words of life and not be dissuaded by the seeming complexity or be antagonistic to its call.

There are a number of questions that come to mind as we encounter today’s reading. The first is,

#### Are We Open Or Closed to the Incarnate Word?

Scholar and pastor, Carol M. Norén,<sup>3</sup> wrote that

An issue in these verses is that Jesus and John [the Baptist] were not exactly what people expected them to be, but instead of being disarmed by the revelation of [their] identity, many of them were antagonistic. They rejected Jesus’ claim to authority, his self-revelation, and his call to repentance. But it is not only Jesus’ identity that is brought into question here. Taking his words to heart challenged the identity and assumptions of

all who heard him. Those words pose the same challenge to us in the Church.<sup>4</sup>

In the earlier parts of this chapter, messengers from John the Baptist had come to Jesus to question, and hopefully confirm, his identity as “the one who is to come, or should we expect someone else?” (Mt 11:3) Following their conversation, Jesus praised John and chastised the people for not receiving wholeheartedly this messenger and prophet of God (Mt 11:10–11).

In our reading, Jesus described the paradoxical opposition that both John and he faced, opposition based upon incorrect expectations and interpretations of his identity.

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, ‘Look, a glutton and a drunkard, a friend of tax collectors and sinners!’ Yet wisdom is vindicated by her deeds.” (Matthew 11:18–19)

Those made uncomfortable by the messages of John the Baptist and Jesus criticised these prophets on account of whether they ate or drank, what and how much, and who with, for that was the only criteria on which they could challenge these great and wise teachers, yet in their criticism they did so illogically—is it wrong to eat and drink or not? They thus exposed their naïveté, immaturity, self-absorption, and their selfish manipulation of others.

Knowing and feeling in their hearts they are themselves sinful, the fallen are quick to judge the righteous and criticise the holy for their lifestyle, so they can avoid the wisdom which exposes the unrighteousness and unhealthiness of those under sin and the curse of death.

Just a little while later, recorded in *The Gospel of Matthew*, Jesus was questioned again:

Isn’t this the carpenter’s son? Isn’t his mother called Mary, and his brothers James, Joseph, Simon, and Judas? And his sisters, aren’t they all with us? So where does he get all these things?” And they were offended by him. (Matthew 13:55–57a)

Many people of our own day likewise hear of this Jesus and filter their hearing through all kinds of assumptions and stereotypes that prevent them from being receptive to his words of life. They fail to notice he did more than merely speak words of wisdom for **Jesus is** the Word of God incarnate; that is to say Jesus is God alive and dwelling amongst us. He perfectly reveals the Father to us.

We have every reason to listen to, and obey, him; yet,

The [reading from Matthew 11] suggests that most [of Jesus’ audience] were closed [to hearing and comprehending his words]. On one hand, we have the crowds who sought signs and wonders, and seemed to have a variety of conflicting expectations. On the other hand, the [religious leaders] who witnessed Jesus’ ministry were blinded by resentment, self-interest, and self-righteousness. They were offended by his violation of their rules of “separateness” and his call to repentance. They’re shown here trying to destroy Jesus’ credibility and eventually sought to destroy Jesus himself.<sup>5</sup>

How much Jesus’ audience is exactly like our own contemporaries! How many people around us want demonstrations of power and miracle before they will believe: *If God heals*

*me, then I will believe; If God helps me win the lotto, then I will believe; If God rescues from this painful situation, then I will believe ... and so the conditions go.*

And how often is the call to holiness and righteousness at odds with the self-interest of people around us? This is the core of the good news about Jesus. Let me describe two recent examples in our day.

You will recall the recent stories of Christian athletes in Australia forced to wear Pride jerseys because their leagues want to portray a gay-friendly image to the public. There is no room for conscientious objection. Even worse, against their consciences, those same players are not allowed to voice their own personal opinions on their social media channels, for that would bring disrepute on their leagues.

But what about the disrepute that brings on the players? Where is the justice in being forced to be seen to be supporting an ideology with which they do not agree?

Why are athletic leagues *virtue signalling* anyway? What does the sexuality of players and fans have to do with playing a game?

The league administrators are acting like little more than children, naïve, immature, self-absorbed, and selfishly manipulating others.

Here's another example: This month, the ACT government has taken over the Calvary Hospital due to a recent legislative change they introduced to give them the power to compulsorily acquire the facility. The hospital's board has decided to comply with the ACT Government's acquisition of its Bruce Public Hospital. The transition will see nearly \$50 million spent on the transfer process, not to mention compensation which will be owed following the compulsory acquisition.<sup>6</sup>

The Human Rights Law Alliance explained,

The Calvary Public Hospital is owned and operated by Little Company of Mary Health, a not-for-profit Catholic health care organisation, whose mission is "to provide quality, compassionate health care to the most vulnerable, including those reaching the end of their life". Calvary has been operating the hospital since 1979 and had 76 years left of its contract before the ACT Government's sudden announcement.

Despite the government's assertions that the acquisition is not related to ideology, the forced acquisition comes shortly after the release of the final report of the government's inquiry into abortion access in the ACT, which was scathing of Calvary hospital, characterising it as "problematic" due to its "overriding religious ethos".

The report advised that the "ACT government advocate Calvary Hospital to provide all reproductive health services in accordance with human rights" (Recommendation 14).

This recommendation, combined with the impending enactment of euthanasia and assisted suicide laws in the ACT, provides a substantial political motive for the government to take control of the ACT's second public hospital.

This is especially pertinent considering Calvary Hospital's well-known stance on the ethical care for patients at the end of life and its opposition to euthanasia and assisted suicide.

The ACT President of the Australian Medical Association Walter Abheyeratna has also weighed into the controversy, telling ABC radio that it was “[i]mportant to deliver public healthcare services without being bound by ideology”.<sup>7</sup>

Abortion, euthanasia, and assisted suicide are all ideologies. We find a wide variety of positions on these topics in the public, but the ACT government will not countenance any such disloyalty. Christians are therefore labelled “immoral” for not falling in line with the new status quo.

Yet it is the ministers of the ACT government who are acting like children offended by a hospital board that will not dance to its flute, nor grieve at its song! To get its own way, that state’s government is stealing the hospital, then running home claiming “it’s mine!”<sup>8</sup>

Those who place their faith in Jesus and live a Christian lifestyle are anathema to those who feel convicted by the Holy Spirit over the depravity of their own lifestyles. They therefore resent the good news about Jesus, reject Jesus, and refuse to listen to his wisdom.

In spite of all the negativity and rejection in our scripture focus, the words of Jesus in Matthew 11 indicate what openness to the Incarnate Word involves: Believing in the one whom God sent and repenting of sin demonstrate openness to the living Word.

It may seem strange to us that witnessing the power of God in Jesus would move people to repentance, but we have only to remember the centurion who sought healing for his servant. He addressed Jesus as Lord and acknowledged his unworthiness when he requested divine healing. In similar fashion, when the prophet Isaiah witnessed the power of God, his first words were “Woe is me! I am lost, for I am a man of unclean lips” (Isa 6:5).

The miracles and words of Jesus Christ were signs pointing to his identity as Son of God. The faithful response is to acknowledge Jesus’ identity as Lord and to repent. It is this response alone that reveals who are the friends of Jesus.

The second question we encounter in today’s reading is,

### **Are We Following His Example in Prayer and Worship?**

The prayer of Jesus in this passage is a model for Christian worship.

At that time Jesus said, “I praise you, Father, Lord of heaven and earth, because you have hidden these things from the wise and intelligent and revealed them to infants. Yes, Father, because this was your good pleasure. All things have been entrusted to me by my Father. No one knows the Son except the Father, and no one knows the Father except the Son and anyone to whom the Son desires to reveal him.

“Come to me, all of you who are weary and burdened, and I will give you rest.” (Matthew 11:25–28)

In verse 25, Jesus began with praise and thanksgiving for who God is and what God has done. He acknowledged God’s gracious will and spoke the truth about the relationship between the Father and the Son, acknowledging both divine mystery and revelation. The closing words are an invitation to a relationship with him.<sup>9</sup>

Notice the subtle pattern in verses 25-30: **thanksgiving** (“I thank you, Father ... because ...”, Mt 11:25); stating the content of God’s revelation, **the reason for the thanksgiving** (“All

things have been handed over to me ...”, :27); and, **an invitation**, or appeal, to faith (“Come to me ...”, :28).

The point to be drawn from this prayer is that praise and worship should be foremost in our lives. We are to worship God for what he has done, on Sundays and every moment of our life. In recognising what God has done, we discover much about God, his nature, and his plans and promises to those who love and obey him. Our response of worship thus reveals God to others and invites them to enter into his worship for themselves.

In a lifestyle of worship we find rest for our souls.

Theologian Geoffrey Wainwright reminded us that

Worship [should] accomplish “man’s chief end” to “glorify God and enjoy him forever. [It] is the faithful human response to the revelation of God’s being, character, beneficence and will.”<sup>10</sup>

When our worship is pure and authentic, in spirit and in truth (Jn 4:23-34), wholeheartedly directed towards God, then our faith inspires and attracts others. Our identity as the people of God will not discourage or offend others from hearing and receiving the words of life, for “wisdom is vindicated by her deeds”.

The final question that comes to mind as we encounter today’s reading is,

### **Do We Incarnate Jesus’ Welcome and His Invitation to All People?**

Of course, when people walk through our doors and enter our fellowship, what sort of welcome do they find?

Jesus’ example is one of being “lowly and humble in heart” (Mt 11:29). His invitation is to find rest in him. How will we embody that same invitation? Carol Norén stated that

We are stewards of the mysteries of God (1 Cor 4:1), not their owners or originators. Rather than claiming to have all the answers and using those answers to bolster our own position, admitting our fallibility and looking to the redeemer, who is infallible, is a more winsome witness. We also incarnate our Lord’s welcome by going to where people are, physically and metaphorically. Recall that the master was criticized for being a friend of tax collectors and sinners. It’s a safe bet that he didn’t meet them in the local synagogue! No. He met them “on their turf”, and invited them to a new life and new identity. Simon the fisherman became Peter, leader of the Twelve. Saul of Tarsus became Paul the apostle. And we show Christ to others when we practice hospitality to all who are heavy laden in our midst.

When we invite and welcome people to worship our glorious God, they receive “rest”. What is this rest?

Let us first notice the imagery of a yoke that Jesus used in his teaching.

A yoke is an implement used by farmers to connect domesticated animals together as they perform some task. More than one animal is connected together; thus, the burden of the task is shared.

In the case of our spiritual life, our “task” is obedience to God, choosing to learn how to live our life according to his code of conduct, Jesus’ wisdom. This “burden” is accomplished with

others in the community of faith, but, more importantly, it is accomplished with the Spirit of God. This yoke is Jesus' yoke. He places it on our shoulders, but it is a yoke he himself is also wearing. He can say, "my yoke is easy and my burden is light" (Mt 11:30) because he is with us, sharing the load.

The easy yoke and light burden also connote the promise of forgiveness for those bowed under the weight of their sin, who turn to Jesus in repentance and faith. The "rest for your souls" mentioned in verse 29 is not a cessation from labour, but the assurance and confidence that results from being in relationship with Christ and results from the knowledge that we belong to him.<sup>11</sup>

## Conclusion

Like many passages in the Bible, and especially those that contain the teachings of Jesus, this scripture focus is paradoxical, it raises many questions. When we take the time to consider those questions together, we find the answers to be more beautiful than we could ever imagine.

Who is this Jesus, who calls us to believe in him and shatters our expectations for our life? He is the one who comes amongst us and shows us the glory and grace of living the wisdom of God. May we incarnate this truth, declare his identity as the Son of God, and reveal ourselves to be God's people in our worship and our mission. For the wisdom of God is vindicated by our deeds.

## Endnotes

- 1 Unless otherwise indicated, all biblical quotations are taken from *The Holy Bible: New Revised Standard Version* (Thomas Nelson: Tennessee, USA, 1996).
- 2 The inspiration and concept for this sermon, as well as quotations, are drawn from Carol M. Norén, "Identity Crisis", *Pulpit Resource*, 3 July 2005, online subscription edition ([www.logosproductions.com](http://www.logosproductions.com), accessed 28 June 05).
- 3 Carol M. Noren is professor emerita of homiletics at North Park Theological Seminary in Chicago, and a retired minister in the Northern Illinois Conference of the United Methodist Church.
- 4 Carol Norén, 2005
- 5 Ibid.
- 6 "ACT Government to spend \$50 million on transfer of Calvary hospital", *CathNews*, 28-Jun-2023, <https://replug.link/a7230cc0> (accessed 4-Jul-2023).
- 7 John Steenhof, "ACT government's assault on religious freedom", Human Rights Law Alliance, 18-May-2023, <https://replug.link/01d99c20> (accessed 4-Jul-2023).
- 8 For a fuller discussion of the implications of this case, see Prof. Joanna Howe, "The ACT's takeover of Calvary Hospital overrides conscientious objection and threatens religious freedom", ABC Religion & Ethics, 17-May-2023, <https://replug.link/f01d4a30> (accessed 4-Jul-2023).
- 9 Ibid.
- 10 Geoffrey Wainwright, "Theology of Worship", *The New Westminster Dictionary of Liturgy and Worship*, J. G. Davies, ed. (Westminster Press: Pennsylvania, USA, 1972), p. 505.
- 11 Ibid.