

SERMON FOR TRINITY 4 | 9 July 2017

Come to me all you that are weary and are carrying heavy burdens, and I will give you rest... (St Matthew 11: 29)

As I said a couple of weeks ago, I have recently taken the plunge and emptied out my study. Of everything: books, journals, filing cabinets full of papers, photocopier and printers - and a vast assortment of things which have no intrinsic value except sentiment or the hint of a suggestion that they just might be handy in the future! Every day I come across things which haven't seen the light of day for a very long time – in one case, I opened a file and there was music that I know I haven't seen since 1970.

So now that the walls are painted and the new carpet has been laid, now comes the huge task of putting stuff back. And the rule is: nothing goes back unless I really do think it will be used again. Which means that every book has to be looked at with a critical eye. Which means every book has to be looked at...

And some will go back on the shelves, some will simply go in the recycling bin – and some will, I hope, form the basis for a new Church library that we hope to put together over the next six months; more on that in a few weeks.

One of the books that emerged from the pile was a book of philosophy. Now, unlike Roman Catholic students for the priesthood, we don't do much philosophy as Anglicans. But it just so happened that the rather dusty book opened up on one of the Greek schools of thought. The heading was marked 'Cynicism'.

Now this might be a Second Sunday, the week for serious sermons, but I am not going to spend time delving into the origins of cynicism, a school first set up by a student of Socrates in the early 5th century BC, but I do want to pick out bits of its thought and test it against the way of live and work today.

The classic basis of Cynicism was to believe that in order to be happy, one should free oneself from all the corrupting influences that one comes across – things like class, secret knowledge, wealth, fame and power. To be happy one has to stop valuing anything that has no origin in the natural world. Ancient Cynics often lived on the streets and in abject poverty. So far, so good.

But the manner of this search for a simpler, more ‘natural’ way of life, was to disbelieve in the sincerity or goodness of other people, to cast doubt on their motives and actions – often expressed by a sneering and sarcastic attitude in debate or conversation.

It may or may not be fair but if I mention someone like the TV interviewer Jeremy Paxman, you will understand what I am talking about: people who at least appear not to have much faith or hope in the integrity of the people they are talking to – to the point where their whole persona seems negative ... something that goes beyond scepticism and is actually pretty destructive.

Advocates of this approach will say, on the other hand, that cynicism is the result of competition where too many people are compressed into too little space and where there is a gap between what leaders say are their motives and goals, and what they actually believe and work for. From Brexit to sports medical ethics, are our leaders being honest about what is going on?

And if a little voice in your head is saying ‘no’, then it just shows how pervasive the cynical approach has become! To the point where the political theorist William Bennett warned America, towards the end of President Obamas administration, that he feared *America would begin to crumble from within, becoming cynical about its worldwide relationships and responsibilities so that it would start to withdraw from its international treaty obligations.* In the light of recent events at the G20 summit, I am not sure that prediction of Bennett’s hasn’t been proved right.

The trouble is that cynicism can come from the best of motives – from a high expectation in terms of standards and behaviour. So that when those standards are not maintained there is a sense of disillusionment – even of betrayal: why didn’t x or y live up to their promise? Can we trust what they say ever again?

And being cynical can seem ‘worldly wise’: we refuse to be taken in by other people. We can appear to be ultra smart *because we are the ones who have thought things through – unlike ‘them’.* We are not going to be taken in by what someone says are we? So we live in a society where disillusionment and distrust lie all around.

Come to me all you that are weary and are carrying heavy burdens, and I will give you rest... (St Matthew 11: 29)

Could we, even for a moment, imagine Jesus to be cynical? When he said the word 'weary', was he perhaps talking to the cynics of his day, the ones who were weary and sceptical of what others were saying and doing?

And when Jesus offers 'rest', what alternative was he offering?

Was it, as it had been in 5th century BC Greece, a withdrawal from the world, the rejection of politics and commercial life altogether? Was Jesus seriously advocating we cut ourselves off from mainstream culture like the Essenes did - or later, the monks and nuns in enclosed religious communities or the Puritans of New England? In the earlier verses of today's Gospel Jesus describes in some detail the way John the Baptist was attacked for staying sober - and Jesus for drinking! In a cynical world you don't seem to be able to win either way.

Over lunch yesterday Sinead played a You-Tube clip she had found, featuring the comedy writer, Dara O'Briain – known best as chair of 'Mock the Week'. Now bits of it were too rude for me to play in Church so although we have the technology I am afraid you will have to rely on my verbal summary. It was about children.

And what the atheist chair of 'Mock the Week' was doing was replicating exactly what Jesus was saying: look at our young people.

Dara's piece described the wonderful exuberance that kids have in a swimming pool. There they are splashing and jumping and having a whale of a time – all quite un-selfconsciously. Up down, left and right, they don't care: it is all great fun. And the adults? There they are, swimming strictly in their lanes, swimming to the wall, then turning and making their way to the opposite wall – as Dara says, like condemned prisoners in an aquatic exercise yard – complaining, as they take each stroke, about the stupid children! But who's stupid?

I thank you, Father, Lord of heaven and earth, because you have hidden these things from the wise and the intelligent and have revealed them to infants...

And what has God revealed? What is the answer to St Paul's fevered question: *why is it that I intend to do the right thing and I so often end up doing the wrong thing? I delight in the law but I find myself breaking it, time and time again? Wretched man, who will rescue me from this body of death?*

To the cynic and to St Paul Jesus says the same thing: the key guides to the spiritual life are gentleness and humility. *This is my yoke: learn from me: for I am gentle and humble of heart.*

The world may – no, does - favour those who appear worldly wise, those who criticise and so easily articulate their doubts about the integrity of all and sundry. And our news feeds are full of it. But the ones *who will have rest for their souls* are a different breed altogether because they, like those children in the pool, are essentially free of the burdens of what other people think and are therefore able to be - optimistic.

Cynicism is, in the words of our first writer, Zechariah, a 'water-less pit'. And the prophet relays the clear message that God wants nothing better than to set us free from it - pernicious and rampant though it is in our day, generations on from the thinking of Antisthenes, 2,500 years ago.

Better still, by refusing to be cynical we may also be averting a serious medical threat. Peter Sloterdijks work, *Critique of Cynical Reasoning* suggests that in practice, the cynical are twice as prone as others to borderline melancholia or depression. That is to say, our cynical way of looking at the world can, unconsciously, drag us down into a state of high anxiety.

I thank you, Father, Lord of heaven and earth, because you have hidden these things from the wise and the intelligent and have revealed them to infants.

Hidden what? The gifts of gentleness and humility, the gift of optimism - and perhaps, too, Dara O'Briains's insight, taken from those children, about the need to have fun!

All that from one book: just another 2000 to go!