

“Frustration and invitation”

Sermon - Gregor Henderson

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Romans 7:14-25; Matthew 11:16-30

All of us know what's it like to be frustrated. To want to achieve something but you never quite make it. To know you are right about something but few agree with you. I believe, for instance, that Carlton is the best AFL team and everyone must surely agree, but few do, least of all those Collingwood supporters. I feel strongly about what Australia's policies on asylum seekers should be, and while many Christians and others think the same, those in government and opposition surely do not. Frustration!

Jesus knew frustration too. In today's gospel reading he's pretty much saying "we've tried everything and nothing works". John the Baptist was an ascetic, he neither ate nor drank, no good food and wine for him, and while crowds went out to see him, few took any notice of his message. Jesus on the other hand enjoyed a decent party, ate the food and drank the wine, even provided the wine at times, yet the reaction was mainly criticism, a glutton and a drunkard. Like children who try to entertain and involve their onlookers by playing the flute and dancing, or when that doesn't work by wailing in lament and mourning, again with no response, there is frustration.

Jesus did, of course, attract crowds. His teaching about God's love and forgiveness, about living with compassion and self-giving service, and about the wrongness of contemporary Jewish ritual and regulation, certainly drew interest. And his healings inspired. So thousands turned out to hear him and hopefully to witness a miracle. But few responded with any real faith in God, or with any real commitment to living his way of prayerfulness and peacefulness and passionate caring for others. Even his closest disciples were frequently half-hearted and uncomprehending. Frustration!

In today's passage, Jesus then goes on to reflect with sadness more than anger on the non-responsiveness of the people in the towns where he had most ministered – Chorazin, Bethsaida, Capernaum. Ruefully he declares that those people will suffer judgment.

But notice something different as Jesus continues to teach. He doesn't conclude his teaching with dismay or with condemnation. Instead he concludes with a beautiful invitation "come to me, all you that are weary and carrying heavy burdens, and I will give you rest... rest for your souls". It's a universal invitation too. Jesus doesn't say come to me all of you, except those from Chorazin or Bethsaida or Capernaum. He offers rest for souls – peacefulness, refuge, contentment, safety – to anyone who responds in faith to his love and care, God's love and care.

Jesus would no doubt be frustrated with our generation too. For many people in today's world, especially in our rich Western world, God is either denied as not existing or irrelevant. Many think that science has somehow discredited God, when in fact for many of us the great advances in science in the past couple of centuries serve only to increase our wonder and delight in God's amazing creation. In our world of relentless consumerism, materialism, individualism and greed, God is up against some powerful human sins. And in our generation Jesus is probably also frustrated with his followers, with us the church, for the church often lacks credibility too, lacks Christian integrity as sexual misconduct or blatant hypocrisy or denominational competitiveness or condemnation of others corrupts and blights our message of love and forgiveness and peace.

However, for our generation just as for Jesus' generation 2000 years ago, the invitation is still there. "Come to me... and I will give you rest for your souls." In Jeremiah chapter 6:16, written about 600 years before Jesus we read "Stand at the crossroads and look, and ask for the ancient paths, where the good way lies; walk in it and find rest for your souls". Take the good way, an old way, the way of knowing God, receiving from God, and following God. Find not only restfulness but also purpose and joy, in coming to Christ.

Note there is a choice. The people of Chorazin and Bethsaida and Capernaum largely rejected Jesus, despite the opportunities they had to see him firsthand. Jesus still invites them, as he invites us - "come to me...", "take my yoke upon you, and learn from me."

Next time you feel frustrated, next time things are not going your way, remember that Jesus didn't stay that way, he didn't keep feeling angry, vengeful, or judgmental. Rather, God's love in him always came to the fore, even when he was attacked, criticised, demonised, even when he was dying horribly on the cross. God's love and God's invitation win through.

The sacrament of holy communion is always invitation. Here, in the bread and the wine, in the devotion and fellowship of our Christian sisters and brothers, here when we particularly sense the presence of God embracing us as we gather at the Lord's table, here is invitation. Come to me, says Jesus, and find rest for your souls. Amen.