**Where to find rest?**

*Proverbs 9:1-6, Matthew 11:16-19, 25-30*

*9th July 2023*

            When Jesus is complaining about his generation – as we heard him doing in our Gospel reading – he sounds pretty contemporary. He thinks they behave like children, who are stuck in their ways and haven’t grown up in their understanding. They live their lives on the market place blown away by this or that fashionable trend, disparaging each other’s games, criticising everything on offer, never agreeing on anything and displaying a deep dissatisfaction with life in general. Doesn’t this sound familiar? Couldn’t it be said about our own generation? We often hear said or say ourselves, we don’t understand the generation growing up around us. How they manage their relationships, where do they get their information from, what motivates and inspires them? What pleases them and what do they hate? Who do they look up to and why? What makes them tick?

            Mostly we are not sure how to react to it. Somehow it’s far easier to know how others should behave than to cope with that behaviour. And, of course, it is always easier to be wise on other’s behalf than have the same wisdom when it comes to making decisions about our own lives. Wisdom is an elusive thing, it is not something that can be taught, but today we will try to learn something about the biblical view of wisdom taking our starting point the enigmatic sentence in the middle of our NT reading: ‘*Yet God’s wisdom is proved right by its results.’*

So why is Jesus frustrated with his generation? Well, he grew up in a difficult and complicated historical situation, when his nation suffered under foreign occupation. Economically, all the wealth accumulated in the hands of the occupiers, and their local collaborators. People’s liberties were curtailed and even their religion seemed to lay heavier and heavier burdens on them. Not surprisingly the air was thick with frustration and expectation as God’s ancient promises were remembered: there would be a leader, God’s very own messenger, sent to show them the way into a better future.  Then John the Baptizer appeared in the wilderness with all the hallmarks of a traditional prophet chiding people for their way of life, calling them to repentance, and warning them of an imminent judgement by a righteous God.

            This was different and for a time, and for some it sounded right, though John himself never claimed to be the expected liberator. Apparently, Jesus was drawn to John as well as he was seeking his own destiny within God’s plans. Yet, after a while John was rejected and killed by the powers that be. But not before he baptized Jesus and paradoxically became an instrument for Jesus to find another vision and another way to present God’s message to the people. If it were a contest, which, of course it wasn’t, we could say Jesus’ way has won the day. In spite of the fact that both John and Jesus undermined the status quo and both were rejected and brutally killed, Christianity has survived now for two thousand years testifying to its crucified *and*living Lord and to his vision of a loving, forgiving, peacemaking God.

            All this, however, doesn’t mean that Christians agree among themselves about what they believe and what is the ‘right’ way of following Jesus. It only tells us that we are still very much in need of ‘God’s wisdom’ to guide us on our journey of faith. In today’s passage Matthew’s Jesus speaks of himself as the Wisdom of God, which is not a designation we would normally use to describe him. We, sort of, know what is meant by Jesus, the Way, or Jesus, the Son of God, or Jesus the Good Shepherd, but Jesus the Wisdom of God may need some unpacking. It may be unusual to our ears, but in the light of our first reading from the Jewish Scriptures we can see that for our Jewish ancestors in the faith it was a more familiar concept. So much so, that in their sacred writings a number of books appear we call Wisdom Literature.

            So, when the Jewish Jesus refers to himself as the Wisdom of God, his Jewish audience would have connected his words to the Book of Proverbs, where Wisdom is personified as a woman, who is introduced as a source of guidance, nourishment and light, foreshadowing John’s Gospel, where Jesus is the Way, the living Bread and the Light of the world. In the part Leslie read to us, she is calling people to herself, just as Jesus does, she is calling them to a richly prepared banquet reminding us how often Jesus himself uses the idea of a banquet to describe the Kingdom of God. She promises her guests life and understanding as Jesus promises rest and lightening of burdens. But in the preceding verses, in contrast to the sombre obligations of the Law, Wisdom calls herself the darling and delight of God accompanying God from before Creation. There is a lightness about her as she plays and dances around continually in the presence of her Creator and calls all humanity to join in the celebrations. Choosing this particular title for himself may shed some light on how Jesus understood his vocation and what kind of wisdom he is talking about.

            Sometimes children have a strong affinity with and openness to this kind of wisdom. There is a lovely little story told about an atheist father who was keen to bring up her young daughter as an atheist like himself. But the 3 year old kept asking questions as young children do, and this time she asked about the world and where it came from. The father gave a reasoned scientific answer and then he added,’ there are those who believe there is a very powerful being, who brought about everything and they call him God’. At this the little girl started to dance around with great joy and said, ‘I knew what you said before was not true, it’s him, it’s him, isn’t it?’

            As we go back to Jesus, whom we left with his disappointment over his generation, we find him in prayer giving thanks for the understanding of the unlearned, the young, and the simple. Then fortified in the knowledge of God’s very presence with him he calls again to all those who would listen: ‘Come to me, all who are weary and whose load is heavy: I will give you rest.’ Probably, one of the best known verses in the Bible, something we can all relate to. We know about being weary, bearing heavy burdens, no human life is without them. They take various shapes and sizes, they may be different according to the time of life, according to where we live, according to our background and so on, causing us a kind of inner restlessness, which we don’t quite know how to get rid of.

            Some of the burdens, of course, just befall on us, like ageing, illness, poverty, disability, natural disasters etc. but some we take on ourselves, like wanting to measure up to others, wanting to remain forever young and strong, desiring prestige and power, alienating people by judging them harshly, or feeling superior to them, worrying about the environmental crisis but not wanting to change our life habits. In other words there is a disjoint between how we would like our life to be and how it is. How we imagine ourselves and how we really are. It can be a real burden indeed!

            If we understand *rest from all this*in terms of comfort or ease, inactivity, or some kind of sentimental tranquillity, I don’t think this is the kind of rest Jesus is offering to us. Jesus as Wisdom personified calls us to a life, which is certainly not comfort and ease or inactivity. His kind of rest is a state, where, in spite of all the opposition, the misunderstanding and ill-will against him, he remains at peace with himself because he is at peace with God. His life and his teaching shows a continuous activity of healing, befriending, forgiving and restoring people, eating and joyfully celebrating with them. Being a disciple of this Jesus then challenges us to lay down those self-inflicted burdens, which on the long run, could easily become second nature to us and clinging to them may prevent us from tasting life in all its fullness; Being the disciple of this Jesus means to rest in the true knowledge and acceptance of who we are, because we are accepted. It is the acceptance of our changing identity through the different stages of our lives. Where there is room for the stage of childish exuberance and abandonment, adult love and responsibility and for the beautiful dignity of advancing years; where even death can be faced with hope and trust.

            The call is to be yoked up with Jesus, who promised to humbly sharing our burdens and enabling us to share with him in continuing his work joyfully so that the dance and delight of Lady Wisdom may go on beyond the Cross and beyond the Resurrection.

*Erna Stevenson*