

SERMON, 4 JULY 2020 – MATTHEW 11.16-19, 25-end

Jesus sounds as fed up with people around him as I am feeling at the moment! A bunch of children in the market place, unwilling to dance, unwilling to mourn. When John the Baptist came, living a simple, rather aesthetic lifestyle, you said he has a demon, when I (the Son of Man) came, eating, drinking, being joyful – then you complained I was a drunkard, a glutton, a friend of tax collectors and sinners – he doesn't quite end the sentence with "I can't b\*\*\*\*y win", but that's what it feels like!

I was moaning (not, of course, that I ever moan) about the fact all the guidance as to how we re-open churches is slow, and complicated, and when something is released at 12.30 on a Friday, you can't really react to it before Sunday. I want to re-open, I want to get back to worship, I want to dance and sing and meet my friends. But I am also very scared of this virus. I've lost friends, I feel the fear of others, I know (through Hannah) the pressure it has put on the NHS, I read the reports of what people with disabilities have been through – are going through – and I am frightened. A large part of me has no desire to open my churches at all. Stay at home, stay away from me, that's all I ask.

Into the fear you can add the anger – the anger I feel at those "governing" us, the anger I feel as people with power and influence treat us with contempt, the anger I feel as I watch theatres, live music venues, all the things I enjoy, close down. The anger I feel being so powerless. And anger and fear are intertwined – I'm afraid for the future of parish churches, for those beautiful, holy special places across our country. I am afraid for the future of church music. I am fearful that what I love is being lost, and that no one seems to care.

I should be feeling positive. We've got one church open. The ceiling work on the other church is looking fantastic. Lots of lovely phone calls and emails from members of our congregation, overwhelmingly positive and grateful. I haven't had to field angry phone calls in the last few weeks, because people I work and worship with are lovely, understanding people, and we know we are muddling through all this together. That means a lot – thank you. My friends at the Cathedral have a new Dean – and I know Peter, he was one of the Archdeacons in Northumberland – and I like the chap. He'll be good. Bishop Libby is writing supportive emails, acknowledging the strain we have all been under, reminding her clergy to take life gently and ensure we don't burn ourselves out. My summer holiday was cancelled with no loss of money – and there will be time for some holiday later in the year.

And we live in such a gorgeous part of the world. I have discovered so many lovely footpaths and beautiful views as I've walked further from home.

Yesterday I walked up to the Millennium Topograph and then down to Croots Farm Shop – which has reopened. I purchased enough to get into my rucksack – mainly sausages, bacon and fruit (but I did put one of their gorgeous cornflake slices in too) – then I walked back up past Champion Farm and across Quarndon Common. 8 miles in total – I felt like “home is the hunter, home from the hill” to quote Robert Louis Stevenson.

This week we are escaping on Wednesday and visiting the museums at Ironbridge for the day. Last year they had a Black Friday deal of buy annual membership at a hugely discounted rate if you’re a student. We were still students then, so I purchased annual membership! That was hardly the best financial decision I made in my life, but we will get over there and at least get one opportunity to explore. How fortunate I am to have the time, and the money, to be able to do something exciting like that – how dare I ever moan when my life is so easy when compared to many other peoples’.

Above all, though, I should be positive because I have faith. I know that God is greater than any virus and that, and I know I often use this image, he is holding us in the palm of his hand. I know, when I stop getting angry, I see an incredible of love and care and human genius and all the good gifts he gives us, lined up to defeat Covid. I know there is suffering and evil, but that is more than matched by love and goodness. I do believe in a something better to come, so I have to believe that death is not the end. Not easy, especially when stood at the head of John’s grave last Wednesday, but easier than having nothing positive to look forward to.

I have faith, and faith brings me friends, fellow travellers on this road. We are in this together, and we will travel together, and we will sort it out as we go. We will use prayer, we will use guidance, we will use respect, we will use love, we will use forgiveness – we are good at this, it’s what we do. Jesus talks “wisdom”, and that’s the best word. Yes, there are rules, there is guidance – but we need wisdom under, over and all around the situation. Wisdom is best found in love, and prayer, and a relationship with God. I hope we’ve all managed to do (at least some) of that in lock down – and we will continue as we move on.

Above all, we do none of this in our own strength – strength that, for most of us, is in very short supply.

‘Come to me, all you that are weary and are carrying heavy burdens, 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.’