

Sermon on Matthew 11:16-19, 25-30
1st one at St Mark's, Newnham, 9th July 2017

A new vicar! A new vicar for you. A new church, two churches in fact, two new churches for me!

It is a strange thing being new. I have no idea what you are all used to, what your expectations are, what you like and dislike, what you tolerate and what you will not tolerate, what your hopes and dreams are, and what your fears and nightmares might be. And the flipside is true, you don't know the same things about me! However, I expect that is what the first few weeks of ministry here and in Grantchester might look like, getting to know each other. I want to hear the story that has got you to here, this new chapter that we are starting together. I want to listen to the highs and lows, the joys and the pains, the things that you long and dream for and the things you fear. These first few weeks will be, for me, mostly about listening and getting to know you and these two churches and communities.

It is though today all an unknown – for you and for me. The funny thing about churches is that if you ask them how a particular service is taken, the answer is nearly always, oh just the normal way. Well let me tell you – every church has its own particular form of normal! I need to learn a new normal.

I have no idea how long a sermon you are expecting. I wonder, are you a church that normally has a two minute thought for the day, a five to seven minute homily, a ten minute sermon, a twenty minute exposition of the text, or a forty minute teaching session? I have no idea which one you are. But then, you have no idea which one I am expecting to do either!

Well, for today at least, I will keep it pretty short. I have to say that when I read the gospel reading set for today I smiled a wry smile. First of all because when I looked back through all my sermons to see what I have preached before, I discovered I have never preached on the

passage so I couldn't even recycle an old sermon of mine that none of you had heard!

But more, my wry smile was because of a couple of the phrases. The beginning of the passage starts – to what can I compare this generation? Jesus appears to be surrounded by a people who don't know what they want, who don't seem satisfied or happy whatever happens. John the Baptist had come into their midst leading a life of self denial and purity and people didn't like it - must have a demon, that one. Jesus, the son of man, then comes eating and drinking – celebrating the kingdom, throwing parties and feasts, throwing around with abandon the generous love and forgiveness of God - no we don't like that either.

I wonder if that generation a couple of millennia ago is not that different to the church now. All of us, however open minded we are, however keen we are to try new experiences, have certain expectations, certain hopes about what God, about what Jesus, about what church, about what the new vicar will be like. And some of that will be fed by past experiences and sometimes it might seem that we don't know what we want, but we do know what we don't want!! Let's be gentle with each other.

I will try not to say too often, well at the last church we did this. Or I have always done it this way. Likewise, please tell me what previous vicars did, or what other churches do, it is really important that we learn from one another and be able to tell our story, but let's accept that things may be different now and that might just be OK. At my interview, I was asked about managing change. And I think I said that there are three ways I might make change happen. First is the big change, the big decisions, the PCC and others identifying a particular issue and over time thinking about it, praying about it, discussing it and knowing it is a big thing and will have a big impact. The second type of change is more subtle, the things that over time get tweaks here and there and then you realise a couple of years down the line that things are different. And the third is change that simply happens

because the person in charge, or leading, is different to what has been before. In my first few months here, I don't plan to do much of the first – those big changes need to be done carefully and, I believe, knowing the history, the story, the things that are important or sacred to a community. I probably won't do an awful lot of the second type of change – although there will inevitably be some tweaks here and there. But I imagine there might be lots of the last kind of change. I am someone new and different, inevitably I will do things differently and be something different. And from time to time that may feel uncomfortable, but please be assured that I will not do anything without thinking, I will not do anything without wanting it to be a good thing for the many, but I will almost certainly get some things wrong, in some or everybody's eyes. It will never be my intention to hurt or upset, as I am sure it is never any of yours but we human beings sometimes manage to do it anyway. Let's be gentle with one another. So that's the first thing – let's try and be a generation different to the one described by Jesus who, it seems, were never happy. Let's choose the positive and the affirming, the honest and the gentle, the patient and be willing to overlook some of the rest as we get to know each other.

And the second thing that caused me to smile about this passage, as maybe it did for some of you, was the very last couple of verses. Come to me, all you who are weary and burdened and I will give you rest. Newnham folk, I gather you have been managing a vacancy for 25 months, Grantchester folk, I think you have been in vacancy for over 36 months. Hear this, Jesus said, Come to me, all you who are weary and burdened and I will give you rest!!! But please note that it is Jesus saying it, not your new vicar!

Again, it seems that the generation of people around Jesus is not so different to ours. People are weary, burdened, weighed down by the things of life, and to be honest of religion. And Jesus says Come. Come to me and I will give you rest.

What I want for us to find together, is life with Jesus. Not life on our own, in our own strength, but life, together, with Jesus.

Note he doesn't say Come to me, all you who are weary and burdened and I will give you rest and magically take everything off your shoulders and make it all ok. He says come to me and I will give you rest and then, take my yoke and learn from me. A yoke is something that joins together two oxen for them to plough, or indeed something to join together two slaves. But Jesus says take my yoke. That is be joined to me and you will learn and you will find rest. So yes, I, as new vicar here, do want to take some stuff on to allow some of you a rest after managing a long vacancy but I am not here to magically make all the hard stuff disappear, or to do everything. I am here to encourage us all to find Jesus, be joined with him, that we learn from him how to be the people God wants us to be, as individuals and as communities together.

So talk to me, ask me round for a coffee, chat and help me to learn the story of the new parishes, and let's be gentle with one another as we look forward together to this new chapter in the life of these churches as we follow Jesus and be his church. Amen