



ST HELIERS CHURCH  
& COMMUNITY CENTRE

# + ◦ TAKEAWAY ◦ SUNDAY SERMON

## Sunday 9<sup>th</sup> July 2023, 6<sup>th</sup> Sunday after Pentecost

### “Come unto ME” Matthew 1: 28-30 Message

**Jesus was not fussed about religion.** He wasn't a religious figure although the church and history has made him into one. What he was is God's idea of what a human should be like. He was a powerful example of all that a person could fully become. A prototype of humanity. The second Adam as St Paul put it.

**Jesus stood in the tradition of the OT prophets.** He challenged the social norms of his day and the institutions of domination, particularly religion when corrupted by power and the oppression of ordinary people.

He had the courage to threaten the destruction of the temple and its controlling systems and angrily protested against the sacrificial system. He recognised that organised religion can be very divisive, self-serving, superior, oppressive, judging, even to the point of being abusive and exploitative. Remember the 7 woes directed at the pharisees and hypocrites of Matt. 23! No wonder they plotted to kill him.

**Like all human institutions, 'Religion' is essentially a human construct.** The countless laws and purity codes of the OT and of NT times were based on a shame and honour culture and particularly against women. **I note recently women pastors have been excluded from ministry in the Southern Baptist Convention – that's religion at work!** Even Rich Warren's Church, made famous by his book, 'The Purpose Driven life' – **and 6000+ congregations leaving the United Methodist Church in the USA because the UMC's acceptance of LGBTQ people.** In the time of Jesus ordinary people felt compelled to follow and make all sorts of costly temple sacrifices to make them acceptable to God, or be judged by a wrathful God

and excluded! Jesus railed against all this. This surely displaces any sentimental idea of 'Gentle Jesus meek & mild.'

Martin Luther described human nature as '**a heap of manure**' and John Calvin gave us the doctrine of '**total depravity**'. What a negation of what Jesus taught and how life denying of the abundant life Jesus came to share. Jesus would have nothing to do with such thinking! That's all about the '**Gospel of Bad news!**' *Bible in Schools Teacher*

In contrast Jesus was at pains to honour all people as created in the image of God and therefore children of God. Often sinful, marred, damaged, yes, but still loved and valued as children of God! 'Religion' invariably becomes focused on sin & morality whereas the way of Jesus is based on a grace filled relationship with God that brings life - spirituality that connects us to others and all of life so we can help, heal and serve. That's the **Gospel of Good News!**

Jesus would have nothing to do with the exclusion or judgement of anyone. He actual said, "***I have not come to judge but to save***" ***Why then is the church known mostly for it's moral judgements of others?*** *Because the church confuses morality with spirituality and so do we. The danger is we come to think we are morally superior. Simply put morality is the way mankind organises life, spirituality is of God.*

***(slide 1). No wonder he said the words of our text .....***

Jesus had a very different take and what a contrast he provides. He invites people to find their identity - not in their social positions of honour or shame **but in who they are in God - children of God made in God's image. Never doubt your value to God whatever your mistakes**

He came as a Saviour to release us from the burden of religion by introducing us to a whole new concept of '**relationship with God**'.

**He came not to make us religious but to make us fully human** and in his life, he modelled what being truly human looked like.

*He came not to establish another religion but a new way of living and being in the world, whatever religion subscribed to or not.*

**Notably, Jesus touched also sorts of people considered unclean.** Lepers, menstruating women, dead bodies. He broke all the laws prohibiting such contact. Religious people of his day were disgusted that Jesus and his disciples would eat with unwashed hands, work & heal on the Sabbath and they tried to shame him for it. To this day we have a lot of people still tut-tutting and judging what people do or don't do.

Jesus kept violating boundaries of decency to reach the people on the other side of those boundaries, those who'd been wounded by rejection, those who were separated from society: lepers, the mentally sick, the motherless, the sex workers, the victims, and the victimizers - **LGBTQ people included!**

Remember how Jesus said, “**I have other sheep that are not of this fold.**” – perhaps he was referring to the whole range of people that religion and much of Christianity keeps on excluding.

**Story of friends asking us to attend their son’s music concert in a K’Rd cellar. Wrong address ending up in a doubtful parlour! A transvestite came to our rescue with genuine help and care, even escorting us to the right address. Even called me darling! Christ surprises because he comes to us in unexpected people. The image and Spirit of God exists in all people.**

**So now let’s look to the words of Jesus which speak to every age and need.** In the Authorised Bible each Gospel is ‘according to St Matthew’ etc. J B Phillips the famous NT translator wrote a book entitled ‘The Ring of Truth’, in which he argues that some recorded words of Jesus have an authentic ring of truth to them, while others have been influenced by the gospel writers view-point, or are history remembered, written down many decades after the death of Jesus. **Our passage this morning has very much 'the ring of truth' about them.** It’s as though someone wrote the words down verbatim at the time Jesus spoke them, and then Matthew included them as part of his gospel written around 70 AD.

### **(Slide 2.) Looking at Christ's words we have 4 imperatives**

**“Come unto Me”** - *An invitation to be accepted* – **“Take my yoke”** – *a discipline to be embraced.* – **“Learn of Me”** *a life to be studied.* – **“find rest for your souls”** - *something to find.* (Here then is the counter to becoming religious)

**1. Jesus says to everyone: “Come to Me” – it’s a personal invitation to be accepted and is issued to all to come into relationship with a loving God.**

The distinctiveness of Christianity is about a loving God who seeks us first, not about our religious attempts to find God. Most other religions require their disciple to seek God in self-denying ways. The parable of seeking and finding the lost sheep comes to mind! This is the very reverse! **This is why Christ’s words. “Come unto ME’** are so important. The Gospel is intensely personal, yet universal & inclusive of all. There are no pre-conditions – except perhaps being lost in order to be found! **He calls & invites,** *“Come to Me with all your joys and sorrows. All your failures, doubts & unbelief. Come to me with all your questions and concerns, all your anger and hurt, come to me for healing, hope and renewal!”*

**Note well: Christ invites us to Himself.** Not to a system of belief or morals or a particular social or cultural way of doing things. Our Christian life is not about the keeping of laws, dogmas, doctrines and traditions, however helpful they may be. It’s certainly **not about moralism or legalism** because both negate the unconditional seeking love and grace of God.

**Here is a self-evident truth** .....you can’t comfort a person with principles, laws or even good knowledge. **If a child** falls over skinning their knees. No use trying to comfort them by explaining the principles of motherhood, they only want the embrace and comfort of their Mum! How intimate the Gospel is! How God knows our individual need.

Jesus appealed to the individual so they could know their true value as a child of God and so seek for a better life, expressed in compassion, forgiveness and commitment to help build a better and more just world for all.

Scholars agree that when translating the Bible into English the word **'righteousness'** was incorrectly used to translate what in the Greek language meant **'justice'**. We interpret ***Righteousness to be*** about morally uprightness, or our goodness, whereas the intent of the original word it's about 'justice', living in 'right relationships' with others.

**'Reaching out and welcoming in'** is our church's best effort to model that invitation, inclusion and justice. But it can't just be here on our terms, we must also 'go' to others to be where they are, and assist them to carry their burdens. As Jordan suggested recently when talking about being the **'host & the guest'** in our service of others.

**(Slide 3) on TBS: A good example is the Tamaki Budgeting Service.**

We all know something of the long history and the involvement of this church in the Tamaki Budgeting Service. From Peter Young to today under the chairpersonship of Paul Williams, Cathy and others from this church serving on the Board of Trustees. Helping others to carry their burdens of indebtedness by being yoked to a financial mentor. This is justice in action.

**(Slide 4)**

**2. Jesus offers all of us a yoke which is easy and light - this is a discipline to be embraced:**

It is not another demand, but rather it is the offer of a new way of being, a new reality, a new power to transform. There is no true freedom in going it alone! Here is the discipline of a 'shared life'. When we become joined to Christ we have His strength and power, and we no longer stagger alone under the weight of our burdens but we have a new ability and strength to cope with life. Yoked to our Lord we engage in humble service bringing about loving forgiveness, healing and hope.

**In our humanness we too easily yoke ourselves to the lesser things** of passing worth, materialism, unhealthy ambition, pride, ego, individualism, all which become bad masters if we let them.

His yoke **'is easy and it is light'** meaning it's **'well-fitting'**. The yoke we are invited to wear is a correct fit for us. Don't try to wear the yoke that belongs to someone else and resist those who want you to wear their yoke.

**3. Next there is the invitation to "Learn from Me" – here is a life to be studied, a life to follow**

It is interesting to note that Jesus never asked to be worshiped. Rather he asks that we follow Him, which is a much bigger challenge. Worshiping Jesus is easy but can be a subtle way of avoiding following him. By following Him He leads us to the path and doorway into the experience of God where true worship of God can happen.

**'Learn from Me'** gives us a new source that educates our spirit! **Christian life is a way of following, learning, studying and growing. A disciple of Jesus is a learner!** We need to keep our L plates on! If we do so we'll be led beyond

our little egos, our personas, our innate selfishness to our sacred self. Like Him we won't be religious, we'll become fully who we are in God. Like Him we'll choose the way of humility and compassionate service.

We may need to unlearn many of our moral judgements in the light of our learnings from Jesus. Remember the woman caught in adultery.

**Saw recently a Video of a senior pastor** making his choice to stand with his gay son at the cost of being excommunicated from the church he'd served for over 40 yrs. But he did what Jesus would do, he paid the price of love, as Jesus did for us all. The Pastor did what was right and just and so created a space in which grace could happen.

**(Slide 5): Here is a wonderful promise “Learn from me and become my friend!** (see Jn.15). This is not an imposition of learning but the joy of sharing the secrets of life with the giver of life himself transferred into our lives as we journey tethered together as friends with Christ. He becomes our way, our truth and our life.

**4. Then we enter into ‘a state of rest’ - here is something to find!**

We all need rest from this pressured world. Polarised opinions, extremist language, conflict and dissension, our inner self-talk and mind-stress, never ending social media, not to mention family demands, cost of living, health needs etc.

**We enter what Jesus promised, ‘rest for our souls’**, an inner rest and peace with and in God. It is the beginning of life shared with God.

We give over our strivings, we relax into the relationship we have with God thru Christ. We prove the delights of His love, the fruit of His Spirit and the experience of an endless journey into the love and presence of God. We can't earn it or strive after it. It is by grace, it is the gift of God!

**(Slide 6 ) Reflective music and Verse**

*In the castle of my heart there is a little postern gate*

*Where, when I enter, I am in the presence of God.*

*In a moment, in the turning of a thought,*

*I am where God is.*

*When I meet God there, all life gains a new meaning,*

*Small things become great, and great things small.*

*Lowly and despised things are shot through with glory.*

*My troubles seem like pebbles on the road,*

*My joys seem like everlasting hills,*

*All my fever is gone in the great peace of God,*

*And I pass through the door from time to Eternity.*

*Walter Rauschenbusch*