

Every politician, public leader, teacher and vicar shares an experience that they would recognise at the beginning of this passage from Matthew. One day everything is going well and everybody thinks what a wonderful fellow you are, yet the next they are all decrying you and describing you as a rogue! It's something to do with human nature, I suspect? Groups of people don't see leaders as individuals but, rather, they tend to put all their hopes (however reasonable or unreasonable) onto the leader. Everything is great while the hopes seem to be being met, but, when they feel the hopes are being cheated then there is a backlash and the leader can do nothing right!

Jesus has been speaking to John's disciples, because John the Baptist is in prison. As John's disciples leave, Jesus speaks to the crowds. There was a time when they were all flocking to John for baptism at the Jordan. He was the man of the moment! But now he's become politically unpopular, to say the least. Jesus seems to be describing the criticisms from the authorities that have been levelled at John, to bring him down, and now also at Jesus, because of the challenges Jesus has been making to the powerful in the temple. The ordinary people don't know whom to follow. Jesus has just begun his ministry, but they are unable to see him as the fulfilment of the prophecies that John has been making. Even though his preaching tours, where he healed the sick too, were hugely popular and must have spread his fame throughout Israel.

Jesus begins by criticising "*this generation*" who seem to be the powerful priests and religious leaders; but would also include the crowds, if they rejected Jesus. I am indebted to Margaret Davies' book on Matthew's Gospel. The complaint about John is that, "*We played the flute for you, and you did not dance;*" Davies suggests that John is being criticised for his severe way of life where he denies himself luxuries and lives a harsh existence: what would be called an *ascetic*. People don't like the severity of John's message, particularly those in power, and somebody living in this way and refusing to celebrate would be seen as being possessed by a Demon. Think about the man living amongst the tombs who cried out fiercely and rushed at people when they approached, until Jesus heals him of a Demon?

The 2nd complaint from the people is directed at Jesus, "*we wailed, and you did not mourn.*" What is being suggested is a funeral, but Jesus doesn't behave appropriately. He doesn't mourn, 'because he is obsessed with the flesh', is the implied complaint. He eats and drinks with people and celebrates (remember the wedding at Cana in Galilee) so he is very different to John in his ministry. The people criticise John for being too severe and they criticise Jesus being too cheerful! Nothing is going to satisfy them because they are in a toxic mood. Anybody who has picked up small children from school after a long hot day knows what that is like!

The problem for the authorities, and for the crowds, is that they cannot control John or Jesus. They want powerful prophetic figures who would give them what they want to have. They want John and Jesus to entertain them, to massage their egos, to rubberstamp their

behaviour. But both John and Jesus serve God, not human desires. This is the measure of leadership, where the leading figure has to set the example and stand firm against both people and hierarchies who insist on behaving irrationally or corruptly. Those behaviours are about serving human desires not the desires of God. John and Jesus are totally focused on God's desires and not upon their own. If that were not so, then they would have easily been able to find a comfortable life.

John preached repentance and baptised as a sign of that. Jesus did the same, but he also healed the sick and associated with both those who were valued in society and those who were despised and hated (the tax collectors and sinners), showing God's desire to reach out and save everybody by His generous grace. The part of the reading we don't have today is a set of woes to cities that perhaps Jesus has visited or maybe his disciples have gone to? Healing miracles seem to have been shown in those places but people have not flocked to follow Jesus, despite the signs? The implications of those are clearly that people who reject Jesus and John, and do not repent, are condemned by God and will not be part of His Kingdom.

In the last part of our reading today, God's graciousness is acknowledged by Jesus; Grace being the giving of undeserved gifts. The *little ones* are the disciples who are following Jesus and learning what it means. The *wise and the intelligent* are the ones who have criticised John and Jesus. Jesus is saying that God's generosity is there on offer for people and in order to inherit the gifts of the kingdom they should do as John and Jesus have told them: repent and follow Jesus, the Son of God. The priests in the temple religion require all kinds of sacrifices from the people and taxes, so that the people can fulfil all the requirements of the law of God. Easy for the wealthy, but hard for those who are poor. The taxes and the sacrifices required were a heavy burden for poor people.

Jesus says, following him is no burden. There is nothing required to be given apart from love, dedication and faithfulness. No money and no animal sacrifices needed. What is unsaid, but is clear in other parts of the gospel, is that following Jesus is not easy and requires enormous strength of will, courage and belief. True followers of Jesus are not rich in financial terms, but they are in terms of their faith. This is treasure, stored in heaven.

Are we with the crowds? Are we with the proud priests in the temple? Do we want to control Jesus and be entertained and flattered by him? King Herod had sought flattery from John and been given some home truths, instead, which was why he locks John up. As always in the Gospels, we are placed with the crowds and left with a choice to make. It makes us examine our own lives, our own choices, our own motivations and faith. It is not a comfortable experience, and it's not meant to be. For those who have to face a sceptical and uncaring world, a powerful faith will be their only defence.