

***It's Complicated!* Sermon by Rev Phil Wootton for Sunday 09/07/2023**

**Matthew 11: 16-19, 25-30; Romans 7: 15-25a**

Last Sunday I was at Lichfield Cathedral for the service of ordination of the (now) Reverend Alison Bruton, our new curate, along with six other new deacons. A very grand service it was too! With great processions, bishops in their mitres, archdeacons in their copes, training incumbents faffing over stoles, and new curates looking radiant! Such a big service inevitably gets a bit complicated, as everybody needs to know where to go at all times, but I was taken aback, two days beforehand, to receive instructions for the service that went on for 14 pages! I know getting clergy organised is more like rounding up wasps than herding cats, but a bit over-the-top, you'd think!

One line in all these instructions caught my eye: It said the bishop's chaplain will 'loiter with liturgical intent.' What a wonderful phrase – 'loiter with liturgical intent!' Watching the said chaplain in action, I took it to mean being ready for anything – from providing the gluten-free Communion wafers to catching the bishop's mitre when it fell off – without ever being the centre of attention herself. She was a place of stillness amongst the complexity of movement all around. It struck me you could extend the idea to express all that these new deacons are called to – loitering with prayerful intent (ready to pray for anyone at any time); loitering with pastoral intent (on hand to offer a listening ear at any time); loitering with evangelistic intent (hanging about in places you might get chance to share the good news); loitering with helpful intent (ready to pick whatever the incumbent has forgotten). Given that the bishop's chaplain was a curate in this deanery until last year, we might say that having mastered loitering with liturgical intent is the sign of successful completion of a curacy.

The ordination service was complicated, like much of life today. Our readings could be said to be about dealing with complexity – the complexity that comes from competing expectations. Jesus speaks about social expectations (those of other people) and Paul writes about the expectations that come from within ourselves. Jesus sounds frustrated: 'There's just no pleasing you lot! You complained about John the Baptist, because he was too harsh for you – out in the desert, fasting, no creature comforts – and you said he was mad! And now you're complaining about me because I go to people's homes and enjoy their hospitality – and you say all I'm interested in is wining and dining. Now which one do you want?!' Well, people want it both ways. Or they just like a good moan! Jesus dealt with the pressure of expectations by being clear in his own mind about his agenda (however much he confused other people). He would not be a 'people-pleaser' – would not be swayed by public opinion, by his friends or by his critics. He did make space to respond to individual need, but he wouldn't be deflected from his course. Ultimately, his simple approach was to show his love in ways far beyond anything anyone had imagined.

In Christian ministry, as in so many walks of life, it's obvious you cannot please all of the people all of the time. Even trying to avoid upsetting people unnecessarily creates surprising complexity because there's someone else who feels hurt.

One of the joys of Christian ministry is that there's no one way of doing it. You can be as different as Jesus and John the Baptist, and each be faithfully doing God's work because you are each responding to God's call. Some people will respond to the one, and some to the other. Christian ministry is about using the gifts and personality God has given you and using them, in collaboration with very different people, for the good of the church and of God's kingdom. That's part of why I believe very strongly in team ministry – not just clergy or 'ministry' team – but the church together, acting as one team, to offer Christ's presence to the wider world. A good team looks like it's working together simply and naturally, but to get there requires working through inevitable complexity, in organisation, in relationship, and in expectation of what can be achieved. In the face of complexity, you need a clear and simple vision.

Paul speaks of our inner complexities, which we all have partly because of the expectations we have of ourselves. *'I do not understand what I do. For what I want to do I do not do, but what I hate I do... I have a desire to do what is good, but I do not carry it out.'* As we seek to follow Jesus, we want to do right; we want to do what he wants us to do. But we all know we don't always manage it. Human nature gets in the way. We doze when we want to pray. We forget the thing we've promised to do. We keep silent when we should speak, and we speak when we should listen. And so on, and so on. I sometimes think we're stuck in the New Year's Resolution school of Christianity. We get it wrong. We say our confession. We resolve to do better. But 5 weeks, or 5 days, or 5 minutes later, we're doing it all again. As Paul shouted at himself: *'Wretched man that I am! Who will save me from the coming wrath? Thanks be to God – through our Lord Jesus Christ!'* Thanks be to God, through our Lord Jesus Christ. The love of God in Jesus, the grace of God in Jesus, is there for us, to give us a power to live by – fresh purpose and vision and joy and delight, so we don't fixate on failure. Nor do we ignore it or get complacent about it. We don't give up the struggle. In the face of complexity in our inner lives, we turn our eyes on Jesus for the simple vision of his saving love, and ask him to fix us from inside out.

So, let's turn back to Jesus in the Gospel. Jesus faced down the pressure caused by complexity of competing expectations. Now, he offers words that are balm to the soul: *'Come to me, all you who are weary and burdened, and I will give you rest.'* It's all been revealed to children, he says. You adults shouldn't make it so complicated. You haven't got to learn or understand every detail. Eternal life is about knowing God. No one knows the Father except the Son and those to whom the Son chooses to reveal him. So, all you need to do is focus on him. In your spinning head of expectations, find the still point. Burdened by demands – whether the outer demands of expectation from family or from work or from friends, or the inner expectations of getting your life right before God – realise you haven't got to get everything perfect. Just let him walk alongside you and gently lift the burden and share the weight you have been worrying about. Let him provide rest for your soul. Learn the value of loitering in his presence. Just don't forget the liturgical intent.