

Laying Down Our Discontent

Before we dive into this morning's Gospel, we need a little context. Jesus has just received a message from his famous cousin, John the Baptist, who is in prison. John asks if Jesus is the Messiah. Jesus points to his deeds to confirm his identity, adding, "and blessed is he who takes no offense at me." After praising John, Jesus rather abruptly compares the people to "children sitting in the marketplaces and calling to one another, 'We played the flute for you, and you did not dance; we wailed, and you did not mourn.'" It's an odd expression, but it perfectly captures the persnickety attitude of those who were quick to reject any would-be prophet who was anything other than *exactly* what they thought he should be.

Admittedly, John was a little strange. He lived like a hermit, dressed in camel skins, subsisted on a diet of locusts and wild honey, and made his reputation by bellowing insults at the crowd. Righteous or not, John wasn't someone whom you'd eagerly bring home for Passover seder. Jesus, on the other hand, seems to have been an especially popular dinner guest. Many of his most memorable conversations took place at the table, and we can imagine him charming his fellow diners with his delightful parables and quick-witted retorts to the heavy-handed questions of the Pharisees and scribes. But that didn't stop his critics from condemning him as a glutton, a drunkard and – *gasp* – a friend to sinners. John was the great herald proclaimed by the prophet Isaiah and Jesus was the embodied Son of God, but some of their contemporaries rejected them both because they didn't perfectly conform to certain preconceived ideas about how a prophet or the Messiah should behave. Honestly, there's just no pleasing some people.

That stubborn self-righteousness is, I think, one of the burdens that Jesus invites the weary to lay aside in our Gospel passage. Human beings often take a perverse pride in how much misery we can inflict on ourselves and each other in the name of virtue. How much can we

accomplish at work if we're willing to sacrifice leisure and love to the constant battle for professional prominence and material success? How well can we measure up to some fantasy ideal of physical perfection by brutally denying ourselves food and rest? How saintly can we become if we continually torment ourselves over any imperfect thought or unkind word that escapes our lips? Surely, God is impressed by the depth of our suffering, right?

Maybe not. Let's leave Jesus with the crowd for a moment and dip into our passage from Genesis. A lot has happened in Abraham's household, and our reading doesn't cover it all. After almost sacrificing his son, Isaac, Abraham came down Mount Moriah and took up residence at Beer-sheba, but we aren't told if Isaac returned with him. Sarah, Abraham's wife, died about fifty miles north in Hebron, but we don't know when. It's some years later when the widowed Abraham sends his servant north to find a bride for Isaac. God leads the servant to the lovely Rebekah, who agrees to travel hundreds of miles south to meet her new husband. Isaac takes Rebekah "into his mother Sarah's tent," marries her, and is comforted after Sarah's death.

Bible scholars have various theories about what happened. Some think Abraham and Sarah continued living together until Sarah went to Hebron to recover from the illness that ultimately took her life. Others think Abraham left Sarah because he feared that, after learning that he'd very nearly slaughtered their only son, Sarah would think he had gone mad. Personally, I lean toward medieval rabbi Rashi's theory that, when Sarah heard what Abraham had done, "her soul flew from her, and she died." It also seems significant that, when Rebekah arrived, Isaac brought her into his late mother's tent instead of taking her to meet his dad. Sarah was always devoted to Isaac. He undoubtedly needed comfort when she died, but he wasn't likely to seek it from the father who almost killed him in the name of obedience to the Divine Will. My hunch is that Isaac walked away from Abraham after his ordeal on Mount Moriah, and never

went back even when Abraham made him the sole heir to his substantial fortune. If my hunch is correct, we might expect God to punish Isaac for failing to honor his father's obedience to his Lord. But God seems to forgive Isaac for whatever anger he harbors toward his father, arranging Isaac's marriage to a woman who can comfort him after his mother's death. To understand how Rebekah comforted Isaac, we need look no further than the Song of Songs.

Of all the texts in Scripture, only the Book of Revelation gives theologians more heartburn than the Song of Songs. You may know it as the Song of Solomon, because tradition tells us that the Song was written by King Solomon, son of King David's passion for the beautiful Bathsheba, to celebrate his own passion for the Queen of Sheba. But the Song of Songs doesn't lend itself to easy exegesis. Parts of the Song sound more like the Queen of Sheba wrote it to celebrate her passion for Solomon, or it may have been written by someone else altogether. It may be one long song, or a compilation of several shorter pieces. No one knows for sure. What we do know is that the Song of Songs is a complex, sensual, and unabashed tribute to the beauty of God's Creation and the delights of married love. The Song is considered part of the Wisdom literature of the Hebrew Scriptures, and we really should read it in church more often, because it tells us something important about our God.

In his letter to the Romans, Paul laments that the good he desires to do under sacred law is invariably undone by the "sin that dwells in [his] members." It's a valid, very human observation. We all do things that we wish we hadn't, and our bodies occasionally drive us to actions that our better angels wish we wouldn't take. Unfortunately, Paul's words have been misused by some preachers to condemn even the most innocent pleasures. When we feel guilty and ashamed for enjoying the gifts God lavishes upon us, it can lead to chronic dissatisfaction and poisonous envy of anybody else who seems to be having a good time. Our resentment

mounts until we're incapable of so much as exchanging a kind word with someone whom we dislike. Jesus may sympathize, but I doubt he approves.

So, when Jesus offers to give rest to the weary, I believe that offer extends to all of us who think we have to spend our lives struggling to achieve the impossible and suffering when we fail. Humble and meek in heart himself, Jesus is free of the deadly pride that drives us to torture ourselves and condemn others over our mortal imperfections. We could take a lesson from him. If the Son of God could relax into his human nature and enjoy uncomplicated pleasures like a good meal shared with good friends, perhaps we can ease up a little, too.

When Jesus says his yoke is easy and his burden light, he's not promising that we won't ever have to endure hard times or do difficult things. He is, after all, the Son of the God who tested Abraham and Isaac so severely on Mount Moriah. Jesus knows that his Father sometimes asks a lot of us. He isn't encouraging us to abdicate our responsibilities, or to risk our well-being by overindulging in things that make us sick. He isn't insisting that we allow other people to victimize us. But perhaps he *is* reminding us that our lives were never intended to be an unending battle, and that we don't have to go it alone. As any farmer can tell you, a yoke binds two horses or oxen together so they can share the burden of plowing or hauling. If the yoke belongs to Jesus, we can trust him join us in it, sharing the load so we don't have to work so hard. And if we aren't working or fretting ourselves to death, perhaps we can find the grace to enjoy God's glorious world and the company of all the beautiful, imperfect people with whom we share it. "The flowers appear on the earth; the time of singing has come, and the voice of the turtledove is heard in our land. The fig tree puts forth its figs, and the vines are in blossom; they give forth fragrance." Let's go check it out, give thanks and rejoice. Amen.