



# *Christ Church Cathedral*

## OXFORD

**5 July 2020: Sunday Worship**

**The Fourth Sunday after Trinity**

**Zechariah 9:9–12, Romans 7:15–25a, Matthew 11:16–19, 25–end**

**The Very Revd Professor Martyn Percy, The Dean**

**'Wisdom After a Hundred Days of Lockdown'**

A very good morning to you from Christ Church Cathedral. As you will know, if you're listening to this at home, some of us will be gathered here today in the Cathedral and I want to say to you in this recording that wherever this finds you we continue to remember you and think of you in our thoughts, hearts, and prayers. We continue to commend you to God's gracious keeping and care, all those who we can't gather with this morning.

I also want to extend our deepest thanks and appreciation for all those who have borne the heat of the day during this pandemic, and carried the weights and burdens of this time. For our Cathedral staff, who have kept the building in order, and done all that is needed for health and safety today – no mean feat. To our Precentor and Succentor, and all those engaged in our communications and outreach, who have enabled something like our worshipping life to continue, and sustained the Cathedral in continuing to offer services, and teaching, “zoom coffee” and fellowship, and unceasing pastoral care for the congregations, students and staff – even when we could not gather. For our preachers, musicians, and so many others, who have demonstrated – through this building and its ministry – that like the God to whom it is dedicated for worship and adoration, we remain open and hospitable. No matter what life may throw at us; or when death comes near to us; God remains open, and welcomes us all.

We are just past One Hundred Days of Lockdown. For some, this will have felt like a hundred years of solitude. For others, that time has dragged, and we have lost all sense of days, weeks and months. Where did June go, exactly? Was April really only thirty days? It did not feel like that...

One of my minor indulgences during lockdown has been listening to golden oldies from Radio 4's enduring quiz programme, *I'm Sorry I Haven't a Clue*. For those of you who are unfamiliar with the show, it bills itself as the Antidote to Panel Games, and sets two teams some wickedly amusing

but essentially pointless tasks, filling half an hour with ease. For me, it is the final closing round that is often the best: can the teams suggest novels suitable for plumbers? Or films likely to appeal to fishmongers? And so forth. *I'm Sorry I Haven't a Clue* works because it blends irony with the peculiarly English fondness for what we might term 'high nonsense'; the result is half an hour of quite base, but also intelligent jokes. Exactly what you need on Sunday after a morning of church.

So in a similar vein, I invite you to contemplate the joys of *Movies That Never Quite Made It*. The object is to invent film titles that don't quite cut the mustard. Here are some. *The Underperforming Seven; Lassie, Get Lost; Lawrence of Suburbia; Decent Offer; Dinner at H. Samuel*; and so forth. Such a game works because it plays with and characterises opposites. Rather like our readings today – a narrative of incongruous contrasts.

You might say that the gospel is all about doing the right thing. But we are given readings this morning that ask some teasing questions. John the Baptist had a reputation for being fairly anti-social. But, to his audiences, his prophetic gestures might have made him worthy of an ASBO. Jesus then goes on to say that we are not to worry with whatever heaviness we carry, for he will add his yoke to that, and somehow the extra weight will make things lighter.

Now, *I'm Sorry I Haven't a Clue* is not the new name for the Downing Street press conferences – though I sometimes wonder. But the title of the Antidote to Panel Games is not a bad summary of our readings today. Jesus, like John the Baptist, spends much of his ministry being cast not as a hero, but as a bit unhinged. Likewise, Jesus, as in so many cases, behaves rather badly. Behold! He eats and drinks with a bad crowd; finds himself narrated as a glutton and a drunkard. But Jesus adds, somewhat cryptically: 'wisdom is vindicated by her deeds'. As one theologian says, in the battles between Jesus and the church, the church might be ahead on points; but is still fighting a war it cannot ultimately win. And it is clear what Jesus thinks: the tax-collectors and the prostitutes are going to get to heaven before the apparently righteous.

Jesus exhorts his followers to be fools for his sake. To not accept what the world sees as rational; but rather peer deeper into reality, and to see that God's foolishness is brighter than the wisdom of the world. How else, after all, can you explain Jesus' invitation to 'all who are burdened and heavy-laden', to 'come' to him; to move at a point when we are arguably already exhausted. And at that juncture, he will give us rest. How will this be done? Oddly, by taking on another weight, namely a yoke. Yet Jesus is careful to add that we will find this one easy and light. So on the surface, the invitation seems foolish.

That is, of course, until you step into kinds of weights and harnesses that are offered. It is only at this point that wisdom is found in apparent foolishness. The extra weight actually lightens the load. The weight of following a vocation is less of a burden than pursuing a career. Sometimes doing what you should do – your duty – turns out to be lighter than pleasing yourself.

So, even when you are sometimes exhausted, the one extra visit or encounter turns out not to be the straw that breaks the camel's back, but rather a light, liberating moment that brings us energy, radiance and the presence of Christ. Who knew that God might meet us then, when we've run out of juice? Such is Christ's yoke. As Paul might say, 'God's foolishness is wiser than human wisdom'. It doesn't make sense. As Brother Roger of Taizé once said: God does not ask for too much; but God does ask for everything. To accede to this apparently heavy demand is the only way to lighten your load.

So, *I'm Sorry I Haven't a Clue* won't do for us. Just as the great game show turns logic on its head, and sometimes seems to be nonsense, so we are, sometimes, asked to be fools for Christ. To go the extra mile; to offer your left cheek to every person who just struck your right. But our course is set by something deeper: wisdom. Foolishness to the world, for sure. But in Christ, we find the wisdom of God. Scott Cairns has written this poem, taking the 'Beatitudes', and extending them to us now:

Blessed as well are the wounded but nonetheless kind,  
for they shall observe their own mending.  
Blessed are those who shed their every anxious defense,  
for they shall obtain consolation.  
Blessed are those whose sympathy throbs as an ache,  
for they shall see the end of suffering.  
Blessed are those who do not presume,  
for they shall be surprised at every turn.  
Blessed are those who seek God in secret,  
for they shall hear His very voice rising as a pulse.  
Blessed moreover are those who refuse to judge,  
For they shall forget their most grave transgressions.  
Blessed are those who watch and pray, who seek and plead,  
for they shall see, and shall be heard.

So, in the days and weeks ahead, be kind, good, generous and hopeful for all those around you. Seek God with all your heart, soul, mind and strength. Pray and love. Take on what you can, and let the power and grace of God lift you up. His yoke is easy, and his burden light.

**Amen.**

[Scott Cairns, 'Late Sayings' in *Slow Pilgrim: Collected Poems*, Orleans, MA: Paraclete Press, 2015; and Mark Burrows, (ed), *The Paraclete Poetry Anthology*, Orleans, MA: Paraclete Press, 2017].