

Proper 9A (5.7.2026)

Romans 7.15-25a

Matthew 11.16-19, 25-end

Sermon

May I speak in the name of the Living God, our Maker, Redeemer and Giver of Life. Amen.

Let's travel in our imagination to a supermarket on an average Saturday morning in early July. It's hot, it's busy, there are many family groups in varying states of distress coping with the weekly shop. Some of the leaders of these family groups will judiciously avoid the aisles containing sweets, ice creams and toys. Others, perhaps overcome with fatigue and the prospect of having the children at home for six weeks over the summer holidays, will have inadvertently drifted into one of the danger zones. From the little seat at the front of the trolley, tiny hands, allowed too near to the shelves, grab various items and drop them in. But the grown-up has noticed and the items are removed from the trolley and put back on the shelf with an angry expression and a phrase something like: 'you're **not** having those'. There's a pause... a bit like the anticipation we felt when we used to count the seconds between the lightning and the roll of thunder in a storm. And then the siren wail of the beginnings of a force ten tantrum sends

shoppers scattering towards the relative peace of the tinned vegetables or home baking aisle.

Reading today's passages from Romans and Matthew, with their themes of **children** and **righteousness**, I've found myself thinking about that deep sense of what is right (and what is fair) that seems to form part of the banshee scream of a wronged toddler. Perhaps we can remember what it felt like to be that age and to feel the desperate pang of having been deeply wronged by the voice that said 'no'. I wonder what happens to that sense of righteousness as we get older... as the childhood years recede into the memory, we are less likely (usually) to scream out our sense of injustice, but the sense itself surely hasn't gone away.

Children or childlikeness seem to be a key focus of Jesus' teaching in the section of Matthew's gospel we've heard this morning. In just a few verses we are presented with both a negative and positive image of a child's mentality. First, Jesus is criticising his Jewish audience for being bad-tempered and quarrelsome children... impossible to please. They continually shift their position to make sure that they can always complain, whether that's about John or Jesus whose arrival John heralded. Jesus is being sarcastic when he describes the Jews as 'wise and intelligent'... their arrogance and pride obscuring any ability to see things clearly.

So on the one hand there's this negative image of 'childish' behaviour and on the other, an encouragement from Jesus to see things as a child would... with simple wonder and without the clouded vision that a myriad of influences on an adult's life can bring.

Jesus's teaching is never quite as cut and dried as we might like... that's probably why there's been a fair bit written and debated about it over the years...

I actually find it **helpful**, in what feels like a deeply polarised and polarising society, to be faced with teaching that might move us away from extremes, opposites and clearly defined boundaries. If Jesus is teaching us about who we are, it's true that we don't conveniently fit only into the screaming brat category (at least not most of us) or the little innocent angel. We're a combination of lots of different characteristics, with extremes, maybe, and many other traits in between.

And Paul, in his letter to the Romans, homes in on this... on us as human beings with characters and free choice. He gets quite worked up about how we negotiate the space between those two extreme examples of our character. The flesh / body that he refers to, we might line up with the screaming tantrum... I want that thing that's really bad for me and I want it now!

He says: 'I delight in the law of God **in my inmost self...**' but notes that there's a lot of stuff that gets in the way of that

inmost self being in charge. Our great struggle as humans who try to be disciples of Christ is that day-by-day, minute-by-minute negotiation between the knowledge of what is right and the ability to act on that knowledge.

This is our life's work, really. We're not likely to be as vocal about it as Paul:

'Wretched man that I am! Who will rescue me from this body of death?'

...but it's extraordinarily hard work. If we believe that we are made in God's image... a God who calls each of us by name... we are constantly having to deal with a separation from ourselves... our inability to act in the right way. Some in the Church like to put a big rubber stamp on this problem... and that rubber stamp says 'sin'. Personally, it's not a label I find at all helpful, particularly given the ease with which it can become weaponised and used for gatekeeping within church communities.

Paul says:

'Now if I do what I do not want, it is no longer I that do it, but sin that dwells within me.'

It's a struggle. Let's try putting the word 'struggle' in that sentence instead.

In children, it's often easy to see how they're feeling... the emotions are often closer to the surface... we can see the struggles they're faced with (cf supermarket injustices). With us grown-ups, this is far harder. We live in this place of struggle... it's a tension woven into our lives... and it's hard.

Maybe this is the burden that Jesus is referring to in those beautiful words at the end of our gospel reading for today. We are invited to bring it all to Jesus... the part of us that wants to receive the Word of God like an innocent child, with wonder... the part of us that looks at the world and life and wants to scream in agony...

Jesus knows us... and he knows how difficult it is to negotiate the space between knowing the right thing to do and actually doing it. When he knew what lay before him as he prayed in the Garden of Gethsemane he asked that the cup might be taken away from him.

And it's that same Jesus, our wounded healer, saviour and friend, who sees the weight of our struggle and says to us:

'Come to me, all you that are weary and are carrying heavy burdens, and I will give you rest. Take my yoke upon you, and learn from me; for I am gentle and humble in heart,

and you will find rest for your souls. For my yoke is easy, and my burden is light.'

Amen.