

Year A

Matthew 11:16-19, 25-30

In 1978 *Boney M* realised their famous cover version of *The Melodians* song, “The Rivers of Babylon” which went to number one for five weeks. It remains in the top ten highest selling single records in the UK of all time. I’m sure if you can’t remember the lyrics you’ll at least remember the tune which is very memorably upbeat and jaunty. It’s a happy sounding record and no doubt sold in the millions because of that. But there’s a very real problem with it and the problem is

so big that only those who are willing to suspend their thinking for a while can enjoy it. You see, the lyrics don't match the music. The mood music of the lyrics is lament, whilst the music itself is ecstatic celebration. The two clash so loudly that the whole thing doesn't make any sense whatsoever. But that didn't stop one million nine hundred and eighty-five thousand people buying it. The suspension of thinking and the disregard for common sense that comes from failing to think things through is a characteristic of humanity and culture. It results in inappropriate responses and it's

exactly this issue which Jesus was referring to at the beginning of our Gospel text today.

“We played the flute for you, and you did not dance; we wailed, and you did not mourn.”¹

One of the most popular songs sung at school assemblies is Sydney Carter’s *Lord of the Dance*. I can remember trying to sing it as a teenager at school and being so confused and even offended by it that I refused to sing it! Remember the lyrics:

“I danced in the morning
When the world was begun,
And I danced in the moon

¹ Matthew 11:17 NRSV

And the stars and the sun,
And I came down from heaven
And I danced on the earth,
At Bethlehem
I had my birth.

Dance, then, wherever you may be,
I am the Lord of the Dance, said he,
And I'll lead you all, wherever you may be,
And I'll lead you all in the Dance, said he.”²

What dance and where did he get the so-called Lord of the Dance from anyway? I couldn't find it anywhere in my Bible. This was all far too liberal for me way back then.

² Copyright 1963 Stainer & Bell Ltd. London, England

But didn't they say about Jesus? "He came eating and drinking, and they said, 'Look, a glutton and a drunkard, a friend of no-gooders!'" Maybe, Jesus was a good deal more liberal than what I thought and I was nowhere near ready to consider that. But then there was John the Baptist. You wouldn't find anyone more conservative than him. He was full of blood and thunder, of heavy accusation and guilt theology. "He came neither eating nor drinking, and they say, 'He has a demon.'" That's another way of saying that he was a fundamentalist nutter! And so faced with these extremes:

too liberal and too conservative we can end up settling for mediocrity. That's never a good outcome because it means for sure that we're neither dancing to the flute nor are we crying with those who mourn. We're responding inappropriately to what is before us.

The wise and the intelligent in the Gospel text today were the Jewish religious leaders of the day. They were the ones who were trying to shape and lead the culture. Religious leaders still need to take heed of Jesus' warnings today. But the objects of his warnings are much wider than they

would have been in Jesus' day. There are so many factors influencing the way people think and act these days. We live in a secular society and we are all seekers after wisdom and intelligence. However, our wayward pursuit of these goals often takes us further away from where we want to be.

A happy and cheerful man once captured a bird and placed it in a cage. "Give me my freedom sir!" cried the bird as he shut the door. Startled that the bird was talking to him, the man listened as it continued. "I am no use to you sir, for I have no beautiful feathers to look at nor am I able to sing

beautiful songs, and I am too small to eat. If however, you promise to grant me my freedom I will tell you three wise teachings.”

The man agreed, whereupon the little bird told him: “First: Do not grieve over things that have already happened. Second: Do not wish for that which is unattainable. Third: Do not believe in that which cannot be possible.”

“Indeed, these are wise things you have taught me” said the man. As agreed, he opened the door of the cage and set the little bird free. The man sat and pondered the bird’s sayings, and the bird flew up to a

branch high up in a tree. After a few moments the man heard the bird laughing.

“Why do you laugh?” he called.

“Because I so easily won my freedom” replied the bird. “You humans pride yourselves on being the wisest of the creatures, yet I a tiny bird, have outwitted you. Within my belly lies a diamond the size of a hen’s egg. If you had not let me go you would be a wealthy man.”

Upon hearing this news our once happy and cheerful man became angry, sad and depressed. And the more the little bird laughed the angrier, sadder and more depressed the man became.

After some time the man started hurling abuse at the laughing bird as he attempted to recapture it. But to no avail. The little bird was always beyond his reach. Finally the little bird called out. "Listen to me O human. When you granted me freedom I gave you three teachings, yet you almost instantly forgot them. You should not grieve over things that have already happened, but still you are grieving that you gave me my freedom. You should not wish for things that you cannot obtain, and yet you want me, for whom freedom is my whole life, to voluntarily enter a prison. You should not believe that

which is impossible, and yet you believe that I am carrying about inside my body a diamond as large as a hen's egg, although I myself am only half the size of a hen's egg."

And with that the little bird flew away.³

Our heavenly Father has revealed true wisdom to infants; to the weary and the heavy burdened; to the very people that no-one in their right mind would go to if they wanted to achieve their goal. That's why God's way is too little and too much for us at the same time. That's why we're so often

³ Adapted from Otto Knoop, "Die drei Sprüche," *Ostmärkische Sagen, Märchen und Erzählungen* (Lissa: Oskar Eulitz' Verlag, 1909), no. 72, pp. 147-149 (translation by DL Ashlimann).

confused by our efforts and why we settle for mediocrity. How foolish and tragic we are! Jesus offered rest to those who are weary and heavy burdened. How can this be when he asked so much of his disciples; his apostles that he was sending out into the world with so much to accomplish in his name? How can his yoke be easy and his burden be light?

A businessman who worked very long hours arrived home one evening to find his 7 year old son waiting for him at the door. "Daddy?" "Yeah?" replied the man.

“Daddy, how much money do you make an hour?”

“Well son, I don’t really think that’s any business of yours” the man said.

“Please daddy, please tell me, how much do you make an hour?” pleaded the little boy.

“If I tell you, you must promise you won’t tell anybody else”

“I promise” said the little boy.

“Alright then” said his father. “I make £150.00 an hour.”

“Oh,” the little boy replied. He looked a little sad, then said “Daddy, may I borrow £20.00 please?”

His father was furious. “If the only reason you wanted to know how much money I make is so you can borrow some you can go straight off to bed!”

The little boy burst into tears and made his way to his room. After an hour or so the father had calmed down and went to his son’s room. “I’m sorry for being so hard on you earlier son. If you tell me what you wanted the £20 for and it’s a worthwhile thing I’ll think about giving it to you.”

The little boy ran across the room to his piggy bank and counted out all its contents, exactly £130.00.

“£130.00, that’s a lot of money son. Surely that’s enough for what you wanted to buy” said the father.

“Well with the £20 you’ll give me it will be” the little boy replied. “I’d like to buy an hour of your time.”

There’s work that is fulfilling and worthwhile and there is work that merely fills our time. Jesus did not offer freedom from work but freedom from soul-sick weariness which comes from futility. Work that does not suit us because it is extracted under compulsion or motivated by fear is not part of Jesus’ plan. Instead his yoke is easy because we

have something to do that really matters. We are working for his kingdom when all God's intentions will finally come true. We accept the yoke of a gentle Saviour who puts our souls at ease. May God comfort you all today. Amen.