

Readings for the Sixth Sunday after Pentecost

5th July 2026

First Reading: Zechariah 9:9-12

Rejoice greatly, O daughter Zion!

Shout aloud, O daughter Jerusalem!

Lo, your king comes to you;

triumphant and victorious is he,

humble and riding on a donkey,

on a colt, the foal of a donkey.

He will cut off the chariot from Ephraim

and the war horse from Jerusalem;

and the battle bow shall be cut off,

and he shall command peace to the nations;

his dominion shall be from sea to sea

and from the River to the ends of the earth.

As for you also, because of the blood of my covenant with you,

I will set your prisoners free from the waterless pit.

Return to your stronghold, O prisoners of hope;

today I declare that I will restore to you double.

Second Reading: Romans 7:15-25a

I do not understand my own actions. For I do not do what I want, but I do the very thing I hate. Now if I do what I do not want, I agree that the law is good. But in fact it is no longer I that do it, but sin that dwells within me. For I know that nothing good dwells within me, that is, in my flesh. I can will what is right, but I cannot do it. For I do not do the good I want, but the evil I do not want is what I do. Now if I do what I do not want, it is no longer I that do it, but sin that dwells within me.

So I find it to be a law that when I want to do what is good, evil lies close at hand. For I delight in the law of God in my inmost self, but I see in my members another law at war with the law of my mind, making me captive to the law of sin that dwells in my members. Wretched man that I am! Who will rescue me from this body of death? Thanks be to God through Jesus Christ our Lord!

Gospel: St Matthew 11:16-19,25-30

At that time Jesus said, 'To what will I compare this generation? It is like children sitting in the market-places and calling to one another, "We played the flute for you, and you did not dance; we wailed, and you did not mourn." For John came neither eating nor drinking, and they say, "He has a demon"; the Son of Man came eating and drinking,

and they say, "Look, a glutton and a drunkard, a friend of tax-collectors and sinners!" Yet wisdom is vindicated by her deeds.

I thank you, Father, Lord of heaven and earth, because you have hidden these things from the wise and the intelligent and have revealed them to infants; yes, Father, for such was your gracious will. All things have been handed over to me by my Father; and no one knows the Son except the Father, and no one knows the Father except the Son and anyone to whom the Son chooses to reveal him.

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.'

A Reflection for the Sixth Sunday after Pentecost

from Rev'd David Higgon

Last week our schools broke up for the summer holidays, and for me as a child, the summer never really started until the start of the school holidays. The summer was a time to enjoy the essence of childhood, the freedom to play, imagine, hope, and develop an identity, within the security of a loving family. Later, I became aware that this was not the experience of all children in the UK, particularly those brought up in the care system or who experience difficult family relationships, where the holidays can be a time of uncertainty and instability, and where even the assurance of a daily school meal can no longer be taken for granted.

It is harrowing to witness the plight of children across the world who suffer the trauma of living in places of war and destruction. In places where children are too often the forgotten victims of violence, and whose deaths and injuries are dismissed as being the unintended consequences of conflict. More harrowing is the deliberate targeting of children, the committing of genocide against children. This month it was reported that the intense scale and systematic nature of the Israeli military operations have resulted in unprecedented death, injury and trauma of Palestinian children, not only in Gaza but in the West Bank and in Israel.

The Christian faith has at different times expressed a variety of attitudes towards children that have not always been positive.

One attitude is to see the child as unspoilt, trusting and innocent, the model of loving dependence on God. Another is to see the child as pre-rational, there to be moulded and schooled into the responsibilities of adulthood, and to grow up quickly. The common view in the ancient and medieval worlds was that a child could be deemed rational at the age of 7, with the age of maturity and marriageability being 14 years old for boys and 12 for girls. A third view is much darker, where, for example, in the works of Augustine, and in his notion of original sin, the helplessness of infants was a penalty exacted from their inherent sinfulness. While these different attitudes can be found in the Bible, it must be said that both the Old Testament and the New Testament, generally have a higher regard for children than is often found in Christian theology and belief.

Attitudes to children differ over time, so a 21st century reading of Matthew's Gospel is often presented as an idealised image of what Jesus is saying, that we should be like children in our faith, that we need to become innocent like

children or just have faith like children. But Jesus's first century audience would have thought about the vulnerability, dependence, and marginal status of children in their world. They wouldn't have thought of an idealized view of children and childhood, but rather that Jesus was telling them to become among those of low status.

The Gospel of Matthew is unique in that it tells the story of Jesus as a baby who flees with his family to Egypt, to avoid the murderous wrath of King Herod. It tells the story of the magi coming to Herod asking where the king of the Jews had been born. Since that was also Herod's title, he feared that another ruler was going to rise up and throw him from his throne. Thus, Herod orders the murder of the children in Bethlehem who were two years old and younger. Jesus' father, Joseph, however, was warned in a dream that this would occur and was commanded by the Lord to take the child and his mother away to Egypt.

Throughout the infancy narrative, Matthew draws distinct parallels between Jesus and Moses. Each story tells of a special child, who will be adopted by a stepparent who has royal lineage. Both children are threatened with death at the hands of the ruling authorities. As an adult, when Moses' life was again threatened he sought refuge in a foreign land. Similarly, when the infant Jesus' life is threatened, Joseph takes him to a foreign land for safety. Both are later called out of the place of refuge to return to the land of their birth, after the ones who had sought their life had died.

The most notable aspect of this story in Matthew's Gospel, however, is the juxtaposition of Jesus and Herod: an infant from an insignificant village threatens a murderous ruler residing in Jerusalem. Indeed, the reigning king is depicted as conniving and homicidal demonstrating the need for a just king. And while Herod is named throughout Matthew chapter 2, Jesus is only named in the first verse. Thereafter he is simply called "the child." This way of referring to Jesus highlights his vulnerability, his dependence on his parents and on God, and that he is threatened with death at the hands of this unjust ruler, Herod.

These three aspects of Jesus' identity as a child will follow him into adulthood. Jesus will ask his disciples to "change and become like children" (18:3). Again, this is not about being innocent or having a certain kind of faith, but being willing to be vulnerable, dependent, and threatened with death as Jesus was as a child. As Jesus faces the end of his life, this will again become his reality: he becomes vulnerable, threatened with death at the hands of the ruling authorities, and utterly dependent on God.

In our reading Jesus describes a group of children who complain that their friends won't play along with their games, whether they are pretending to play celebratory music or playing a sad, mournful song.

Jesus used this analogy to criticize the stubborn and contradictory attitudes of the religious leaders of his time. He compared the generation to these sulking children because they rejected John the Baptist for being too strict (fasting and avoiding society) and then turned around and rejected Jesus for being too approachable (eating and drinking with sinners).

This also reflects the ambivalence of Christian attitudes towards children; on the one hand we have a connotation of being childlike that is associated with childlessness as in this parable of the children playing on the market square who bicker over their games; games that imitate adult life, in role playing weddings where they play their flutes, or role playing funerals where they sing their dirges. On the other hand, in our reading, Jesus talks of what his father has hidden from the understanding of the wise and intelligent but has revealed to infants. Jesus enjoins his followers

to become like little children, not so much in their innocence but by being willing to be vulnerable, and dependent, and lowly in status.

Throughout Matthew's Gospel, Jesus interacts with a variety of people: men and women, slaves and free persons, able-bodied and disabled, Jewish and Gentile, adults, youth, and children. Among all of those, the easiest to overlook are the children. For the most part they are silent characters who are mostly ill and in need of healing, for example Jarius's daughter; or some are healed but not present; others seem to be merely objects of Jesus' teachings. Jesus does not appear to have any conversations with children that are recorded in the Gospel narrative, yet by reading and re-reading these stories of children in the Gospel, we develop a fuller, more accurate picture of what it means that children are a part of the family of God, a part of the reign of God, and a part of the human community, to be loved and nurtured and protected and not ignored, forgotten or dismissed as the unintended victims of the violence, or, as in the case of Palestine, to be deliberately targeted with the intention of destroying the essence of childhood the freedom to play, imagine, hope, and develop an identity.