

Sermon on Sunday 5 July 2026

by Rev. Scott Martin

Readings: Zechariah 9. 9-12 & Matthew 11. 16-19, 25-30



In the unexpected places

A couple of weeks ago, a customer of the company I work for returned a pair of pyjamas to the store. She had decided that she no longer liked the colour of the original pair she had purchased and wanted to exchange them for a pair in a colour she did like.

Having reassured her that this wasn't a problem, I invited her to accompany me downstairs to the nightwear section of the store. They were very nice pyjamas; white Sea Island cotton in a

herringbone cloth with rose-coloured piping and Mother of Pearl buttons! High-end nightwear!

I gathered all the pyjamas we had to offer in her size and placed them on the counter; a lovely array of options.

I offered the first pair as a possibility: "What about this lovely pink check pair?"

"No, I don't like those," she said. "I don't like checks."

I tried again: "We also have light blue with a nice white piping?"

"No, not blue," came the reply.

I suggested another pair: "This cream pair is nice."

"No, I don't like the burgundy piping."

Well, to cut a long story short, things went on in this vein, exhausting all that I had to offer, without any success.

As we both stood in a somewhat frustrated and stubborn silence, I decided to ask her a question. "Tell me, madam, what DO you like?" Oh dear, had I gone a bit too far? I do have a reputation at work for getting a bit sarcastic when my patience is tried!

The customer looked at me, half stunned, half amused, and

replied, "I don't know... something nice... you tell me, you're the expert, after all!" After offering to make her a pair of pyjamas in a cloth of her choice, she declined, as it would have taken a couple of weeks. She collected a refund and went on with her day!

Maybe you've had experiences where whatever you said, whatever you did, exhausting all your resources for the person or situation in question, it just wasn't good enough! Indeed, as the saying goes, "You can lead a horse to water, but you can't make it drink."

Now, I'm no psychoanalyst, and not really in a position to diagnose why my customer refused everything I offered. She may well have had good reason. But I did reach a point in the encounter where I inwardly thought, "I don't think anything is going to be good enough, is it?" I tried, I reached out, with possibilities/opportunities/suggestions, and that's all I could do.

In our Gospel reading this morning, Jesus presents his teaching in a situation that seems to be encountering a degree of deliberate stubbornness. He highlights the tragic tendency of both the religious leaders and the people of his day to reject God's message, regardless of how it is packaged. He compares his generation to petulant children in the marketplace, who refuse the hand of opportunity when invited to join in with the games of other children, playing weddings and funerals.

The issue, of course, is not the invitation or message, but the hearts of the listeners, demanding that what is on offer to them

must conform to their expectations, illustrating a childish, resistant attitude.

In a similar way, Jesus contrasts the ministries of John the Baptist with his own ministry. For John came neither eating nor drinking, and he is accused of "having a demon". The Son of Man came eating and drinking, and he is accused of being a glutton and a drunkard. A no-win situation!

The hypocrisy here, of course, that Jesus is pointing out, lies in the fact that unbelief finds excuses for rejecting any approach, dismissing John the Baptist's stern calls to repentance as too harsh and Jesus' joyful grace in accepting the hospitality and company of tax collectors and sinners is rejected as too compromising.

But Jesus' lesson to those who would close opportunity and possibility, because it doesn't conform to their own preconceived ideas, is found in the words, "Wisdom is vindicated or proved right by her deeds."

In offering these words, we're invited to see that truth is validated by its results, not by popular opinion or attempts to dictate God's agenda. It is the transformed lives of the repentant and those deemed as outcasts, rather than the approval of the elite, that affirms Jesus' ministry.

Have you ever been "determined to be displeased?" I know I have.

It can happen while anticipating an unavoidable conversation

that you know you must have, with someone you disagree with, thinking beforehand, "There's nothing they could say that will change my mind, they're quite simply wrong!"

It can also happen when a supposedly secure view of things, which has served you well for a long time, begins to be shaken at the foundations; when someone invites you to consider it from a challenging or renewed perspective.

It is this kind of stubbornness that Jesus saw within the religious authorities of his day. He challenged these attitudes, not to criticise piety or a reverence for tradition, but as a way of revealing the impenetrable boundaries that fixed ideas can erect to stay in control and remain safe!

But why? Why would he do that? To answer that question, we can return to that simple but penetrating sentence, "Yet wisdom is vindicated by her deeds."

When John the Baptist called people to repentance, they were responding, they were being baptised. Yet despite that, those who were "experts in the law" said he had a demon! When Jesus was gaining disciples by eating with tax collectors and sinners, he was accused of being a glutton and a drunkard, even though people's lives were being transformed!

The authorities of Jesus' day - those determined to be displeased, those who continually moved the goalposts to stay in control, with their "This is not good enough" responses - were having their true agendas exposed! Even when they could see that the things they were opposed to were bearing fruit, they continued to criticise in order to maintain the appearance of

authority. May that be a warning and lesson to all religious leaders!

By exposing the power-hungry blindness and pride of the so-called "experts", Jesus prays, "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".

Jesus is not, of course, advising against wisdom or intelligence, but he is making the serious point that human beings can become so inflated with their own sense of religious expertise, they can adopt the misguided fantasy of believing they are in the full knowledge of when and where and how God will be at work in the world.

It is relief from this "knowledge of the experts" - or, more importantly, relief from the heavy burden of the expectations that they heap onto others in order to stay in a right relationship with God - that leads Jesus to say, "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 my yoke is easy, and my burden is light."

Jesus knows that the spirit of God blows where it wills, it cannot be harnessed or controlled by any human attempt to dictate where God is allowed to be at work. Wisdom is vindicated by her deeds, and wherever she bears fruit is a call to us all to witness to that, regardless of whether she is behaving conventionally or not.

And so, our Gospel message for this morning is very much one of reassurance. The reassurance that when it comes to growing as a disciple of Christ, going deeper into God, we are being invited by Jesus to set aside the heavy burden of believing that it is up to us to make sure everything is “religiously perfect” for God to be present. God is there before we’ve even arrived on the scene. And we do not win his approval, or discover the fruits of his love in action, by being experts, but by being willing to become like little children; open, and playfully honest, being willing to be surprised to discover the work of the Spirit in places we never would have expected!

An Eastern Orthodox Christian friend of mine once said, “Never be afraid of the playful element of God. You know, sometimes he’s like a child in the marketplace, inviting you to a game of hide-and-seek, and just when you think you can’t find him, he joyfully allows you to discover him, and when you do... well, it is all hugs and laughter, hugs and laughter and joy!”

Amen.