

## St Brandon's 9 July 2023, 10.15am. Baptism of Saoirse Lucas.

### Matthew 11: 16-19; 25-end

It's lovely to welcome so many of you to church today for Saoirse's christening. She arrived just as we were mourning her great grandmother's death, and in time to be here for the much sadder occasion of Mary's funeral.

A time to mourn, and today a time to dance. A reminder that God is with us in sorrow and in joy, and for the past, present and future of our lives and families.

And an opportunity today to think about the **invitations** we receive, and how we respond to them. I still love to open a physical letter or card inviting me to a christening, a wedding or a party. Less welcome are the invitations to a funeral or memorial service. But because the people at the heart of these occasions matter, and we want to celebrate or mourn with them, we accept the invitation, embracing the sorrow and joy which are the warp and weft of our lives.

Mourning and dancing feature in the Bible reading we've just heard. At the start, Jesus addresses crowds in Galilee, crowds drawn to his story telling, miracles and healings, but still complaining about him, and the company he keeps. When he 'plays the flute' they refuse to dance, call him a 'glutton', reject the invitation.

The same crowds also went to hear John the Baptist, the wild- man of the desert, the preacher who never pulled his punches about sin in people's lives, inviting them to repent and be baptised in the river Jordan. They accuse *him* of being mad – 'he has a demon' and won't listen to him either. When he wails, they won't mourn...

John and Jesus both bring God's invitation, with very different styles, and lifestyles, yet both are rejected. This generation, says Jesus, are like spoilt children who don't know what they want- dancing or wailing - too busy judging and criticising instead of being open to God's message, accepting his invitation to eternal life with him..

Then, in some verses we missed out, come a few home truths. Jesus names towns and villages he's visited:

Woe to you ! Wake up! Hear the invitation!

Open your minds and hearts to the love and mercy of God, while you have the chance.

I wonder what Jesus might say around here today? Woe to you Brancepeth, Brandon, Meadowfield...?

I wonder if we pay any attention to God's invitation? Perhaps we look at the pain and division caused by religion and the church and steer well clear.

Maybe we come to church occasionally, or quite often, even weekly, but still keep God at a distance? It's certainly easier to take ignore or criticise, than to hear God's invitation and respond.

But what is the wise thing to do? *Wisdom is vindicated by her deeds*, says Jesus: the way we live shows our choices and priorities, the proof of the pudding...

Lets jump now to the end of today's reading and another invitation. You may have heard these words of Jesus before, but perhaps today they will really connect with you, whatever you're carrying in your life and your heart just now..

Jesus says, to his followers then and to us today

*Come to me, all you that are weary and 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 spirit, and you will find rest for your souls.*

*For my yoke is easy, and my burden is light.*

When Jesus talks about his *yoke*, he speaks as a carpenter, the trade he learned from his earthly dad Joseph: he'd have made yokes from a young age.

They're the wooden bars which you place on animals' or people's shoulders so they can tow tools or carry loads of wood, stones, grain, olives. In first century Palestine the mules, donkeys and oxen were the HGVs and they still are in many parts of the world today.

Similarly, we might be used to having cars, buses or delivery vans to carry heavy stuff for us, but in many places the weight of such burdens still falls on women's and children's shoulders, carrying goods to market, or water from a well or stream. And I know that Saoirse's great grandmother Mary was very used to carrying loads as she delivered milk in all weathers to her customers in this locality.

And don't we all, at times, carry burdens of guilt, anxiety, loneliness, grief...

Jesus talks about yokes because they were everyday items that everyone understood, and because he'd learned how to make good ones, to fit them so they didn't chafe, so burdens felt lighter because the yokes bore the weight of them.

Jesus invites *us* to take *his* yoke upon us and learn from him - he'll teach us how to walk in step with him, in the way a pair of horses or oxen might have been yoked together to pull a plough. I love that image of being 'yoked to Jesus', not having to walk through life on own but in step with him. Jesus isn't distant or critical but gentle and humble, so in taking his yoke, we find rest for our souls. And Jesus the Son of God, shows us what God the Father is like too. Not distant or critical, but gentle with us, there for us, offering freedom from guilt, peace in anxiety, love in loneliness, comfort in grief; rest for our souls. Hear that invitation today.

Before I finish, there's one more thing about the yoke image Jesus uses. The religious teachers of his day talked about the *yoke* of the Torah, the Jewish law, which gave rise to the hundreds of rules they had to keep every day.

The yoke of the law, especially the way it was imposed by those teachers, was heavy!

So, in stark contrast to the very *difficult yoke* of rules and the *heavy burden* of not making mistakes, trying to be good enough, Jesus says that *his yoke is easy and his burden light*.

*His yoke* is about knowing God for ourselves, through him, about receiving forgiveness and being loved. It's about relationship, not religion.

Jesus' invitation is for us today. You may not be sure if you believe God even exists, let alone is interested in you and your life. But Jesus says Come to me, try on my yoke, see how well it fits, because I know you and love you. See how I'll take the weight of your burdens and give you rest, rest for your soul.

Of all the invitation you receive, happy or sad, be sure to hear this one today, consider it carefully, and I pray you'll accept it.