

St Mary's Dorchester, Sunday 5th July 2026, i.e. 5th Sunday after Trinity.

Zechariah 9:9-12

Romans 7:15-25a

Matthew 11:16-19, 25-end

In the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.

Institutional forms of Christianity like the Church of England have a problem. Generally speaking, the more mainstream Christianity becomes, the more reluctant it is to address the darker parts of our religious experience. With establishment comes a desire for stability, and in the interests of courting the largest possible audience we try to avoid anything that might make us seem judgemental or exclusive. So being an institution goes hand in hand with an aversion to conflict. (Christians who don't feel like they belong to an institution go to a different extreme, but that's another sermon.)

Scripture is a witness to all sorts of human emotions, some of them pretty dark. And not only human emotions: Jews and Christians have discerned a mixture of emotions (or something like emotion) in the life of God. So throughout the Bible God is revered not only for his steadfast love, but also for the anger with which he confronts injustice. In our tradition the two often go hand in hand – both love and anger – but the more settled we become, the less willing we are to confront it.

My own knee-jerk reaction when people talk about how angry God is with us is to point to Jesus, and the message of radical love he preached. Indeed, I found myself doing that in a conversation earlier this week. I flatter myself that there is a large amount of truth in my knee-jerk response: what Jesus commands us about refraining from judgement [Matthew 7:1-5] and about forgiveness within Christian community [e.g. Matthew 18:21-22], to take two examples, is far beyond what many of us consider practical or even desirable. This seems like a trend to me: where Jesus' teachings are difficult, it is often because they are more loving than we are comfortable with, not less.

But Jesus, of course, was not a teacher of unmixed positivity. Some things he experienced made him angry, and he clearly saw part of his vocation – in his first coming, to say nothing of his second – as pronouncing judgement on the same wrongs that provoked God's wrath in the Hebrew Bible. The Hebrew prophets railed against the oppression of the vulnerable [e.g. Jeremiah 7], against idolatry [e.g. Psalm 115], and against hardness of heart [e.g. Isaiah 30]. When we think of the episodes in the Gospels where Jesus expresses anger, it's usually at the same things [e.g. Mark 3:1-6; John 2:14-22; Matthew 23].

The Gospel reading we heard this morning is a good example. I asked Jane to include a section of this reading which our lectionary misses out. It won't surprise you to learn that it's the bit where Jesus reproaches the unrepentant cities on which he has lavished so much attention. Interestingly, the word "Woe" is very similar in Hebrew [*hoy*], Greek [*ouai*] and contemporary English, and it performs a very similar function in each: expressing anything "from compassionate sorrow to uncompromising doom" [Strong's Greek Lexicon].

Jesus is clearly at the "doom" end of the scale in this passage. The communities he condemns were probably places in which he grew up, where he felt very much at home. Despite that familiarity – or perhaps because of it – he compares them unfavourably not only with the cities of the Gentiles but also with Sodom, that notorious den of iniquity [Genesis 18:16-19:29]. Avoiding this bit of the chapter, as we were meant to, is not a trivial change: what is actually a broad sweep of different emotion in these verses becomes something safer, more civil, less likely to upset anyone.

What do we do with these difficult emotions? And what sense can we make of a God who is love, but who is also often angry?

The first thing to say, is that we will never make sense of this if we do what our Lectionary has done this morning, and simply miss out the bit which we find uncongenial. The first step is therefore to consider the varied emotional tone of Scripture without flinching. Our Gospel today begins with something like sadness: the unrequited feeling of a musician whose audience just don't respond to the music they're hearing. I've mentioned the doom already; anger feels like a natural progression from sadness. And the passage finishes with something like perspective: Jesus returns to his relationship with his Father; and with that perspective it feels easier to offer comfort and relief. I see the emotional range of this Gospel as proof that Jesus is discerning (and following) a narrow way between theological extremes. He isn't being carried away by any one emotion; rather, within his emotion he's still listening to God. We too ought to pray for discernment as we seek God's narrow way.

When it comes to thinking about discernment, I find what Paul has to say very helpful. Although in the passage we heard today Paul is certainly writing from his own experience, what he has to say applies equally to the Church. Of course, Paul isn't talking about the anger of God: he's talking about the way that sin corrupts even the best actions, the best of intentions. So he says, "I find it to be a law that when I want to do what is good, evil lies close at hand." [Romans 7:21] Perhaps we imagine that

by following our favoured theological agenda we are treading a safer spiritual path. But Paul's message is that there is no such thing as a desire (or an action) that is spiritually "safe": rather, there are varieties of temptations that can twist any good thing in a bad direction. If my theological knee-jerk is to focus on the love of God, that choice can lead me into a particular family of temptations. I might be less willing to challenge actual sin when I see it. Jesus had a clear sense of his Father's loving attention and he was still able to call out sin when he saw it. When his calls fall on deaf ears, he is willing to express anger: not out of a desire to destroy, but as a renewed call to purity and holiness. We should seek to be like Jesus, holding contrasting truths, contrasting emotions, in tension with one another.

The final thing to say about God's love and God's anger is that God is one. God is not like us, occasionally torn apart by conflicting beliefs, conflicting desires. Rather, in God there is only the eternal creative love which made us and which desires our salvation. Jesus embodied that eternal love in a human life; and whereas God is beyond our attempts to define him, we see in Jesus something more familiar. His story is a human story: unrequited desire; anger; and a synthesis. We know from our human experience that, when we are at our best, anger and love are not mutually exclusive. In fact, our loved ones often have a unique power to provoke our anger, and many of us are only able to be honest about that anger with the people we love best. In God too, anger is an expression of love: the love that demands we change.

In the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.

Hear the Gospel of our Lord Jesus Christ according to Matthew.

¹⁶ Jesus said to the crowds, “But to what will I compare this generation? It is like children sitting in the marketplaces and calling to one another,

¹⁷ ‘We played the flute for you, and you did not dance;
we wailed, and you did not mourn.’

¹⁸ “For John came neither eating nor drinking, and they say, ‘He has a demon’;

¹⁹ 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.”

²⁰ Then he began to reproach the cities in which most of his deeds of power had been done because they did not repent. ²¹ “Woe to you, Chorazin! Woe to you, Bethsaida! For if the deeds of power done in you had been done in Tyre and Sidon, they would have repented long ago in sackcloth and ashes. ²² But I tell you, on the day of judgment it will be more tolerable for Tyre and Sidon than for you. ²³ And you, Capernaum, will you be exalted to heaven?

No, you will be brought down to Hades.

“For if the deeds of power done in you had been done in Sodom, it would have remained until this day. ²⁴ But I tell you that on the day of judgment it will be more tolerable for the land of Sodom than for you.”

²⁵ At that time Jesus said, “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; ²⁶ yes, Father, for such was your gracious will. ²⁷ 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.

²⁸ “Come to me, all you who are weary and are carrying heavy burdens, and I will give you rest. ²⁹ 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. ³⁰ For my yoke is easy, and my burden is light.”

This is the Gospel of the Lord.