

Giving things up: What would we call Jesus today?

5 July 2026: Reflection on Zechariah 9:9-12 and Matthew 11:16-19,25-30.

-Tristan Sullivan-Vaughan

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!'

The start of today's gospel reading reminds me a little of the story of Goldilocks and the three bears. The porridge is either too hot or too cold... the prophet is either a drunkard or has a demon.

It also reminds me of that feeling, some of you might be familiar with, that an overly critical boss gives you. The font on that report is too small... now its too big!

With some people you just can't win.

And while it is comforting to know that Jesus, God in humanity, was familiar with the frustrations of human life, I think it also says something larger about the human condition – we don't generally like people who stand out all that much and do our best to cut them down. Especially if those people are asking us to change. Change can be painful.

It's useful for us to dismiss that uncomfortable voice, because if we cut someone down then we don't really need to listen to what they have to say. We silence and dismiss them and can safely forget all about that silly message they were peddling that made us feel unpleasantly uncomfortable. John the Baptist was a bit provocative – well he has a demon so we don't need to worry too much about what he says. Then Jesus appears – well he parties too much and hangs out with a bad crowd. What could he possibly offer?

However, assuming that we aren't quickly dismissing him, Christ tells us that 'my yoke is easy, and my burden is light'... but only two weeks ago, lectionarily speaking, he was saying 'Whoever loves father or mother more than me is not worthy of me, and whoever loves son or daughter more than me is not worthy of me, and whoever does not take up the cross and follow me is not worthy of me.' When he put it like that it didn't sound so light.

I don't feel, however, that there is a contradiction here.

To get to why I say that, can you imagine a world where people actually lived according to the way of Christ?

John of Patmos's vision of the New Jerusalem in Revelation is one idea of it:

'On either side of the river is the tree of life with its twelve kinds of fruit, producing its fruit each month, and the leaves of the tree are for the healing of the nations. Nothing accursed will be found there any more.'

There is also a glimpse in our first reading from Zechariah,

'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.'

It sounds lovely doesn't it. If that's what God is offering, there is no burden there!

But in the way of that vision is a whole exploitative order of doing things that needs to pass away. Many people are, to one degree or another, invested in and benefit from the status quo. Change - giving something up - is painful.

Across the world, both here in Aotearoa and abroad, we have economic systems that directly or indirectly exploit people both those here in our own backyard and overseas, in places we don't see, where we don't need to feel responsible. We have constructed an order that leads to super-rich with untold, superfluous, wasteful abundance, and people who struggle to feed their children. Economists will tell you that this is an unavoidable effect of the Market. Some people lack skills that the Market wants, other people have them. For the Market to work 'efficiently' there must be competition. There must be winners and losers. On top of that, the Market needs to keep growing! And that means people need to consume more and more.

Speaking on this topic Pope Leo recently wrote, in an exhortation to the Roman Catholic Church, but one which I think it is applicable to the whole of the Christianity:

"We must continue, then, to denounce the 'dictatorship of an economy that kills,' and to recognize that 'while the earnings of a minority are

growing exponentially, so too is the gap separating the majority from the prosperity enjoyed by those happy few. This imbalance is the result of ideologies that defend the absolute autonomy of the marketplace and financial speculation... A new tyranny is being born, invisible and often virtual, which unilaterally and relentlessly imposes its own laws and rules.' There is no shortage of theories attempting to justify the present state of affairs or to explain that economic thinking requires us to wait for invisible market forces to resolve everything. Nevertheless, the dignity of every human person must be respected today, not tomorrow, and the extreme poverty of all those to whom this dignity is denied should constantly weigh upon our consciences."

For a truly just world, the world Christ speaks about, a whole way of thinking and doing things needs to be swept away. There are people who benefit from it and hold most of the power. They want to continue leading their superfluous, wasteful lives. They need to give something up and that is painful.

The burden of living in God's ways is light, even if it does require a constant need for self-scrutiny. God works, after all, by attraction, not compulsion... but in order to bring the new Jerusalem into being, some people will need to give things up and people don't like giving things up.

All of this makes me wonder, hypothetically, how do you think people would respond to Jesus today? Because I rather imagine he'd have a few prophetic criticisms for our society. I imagine some people would find his naming of problems a little close to home – he'd be called judgemental for sure.

His eating and drinking with sinners would rub many people up the wrong way, just as it did in 1st century Palestine – he shouldn't be encouraging them! Then of course you would get the people who would say that while his messages about the poor and being in right relationship with people all very nice sounding, they really aren't practical. Certainly not all of the time. There is a market, the market needs competition, winners and losers. It needs consumption and perpetual growth – that's just how things work! A whole way of thinking and doing things needs to pass away before we get to the New Jerusalem.

And that brings me to the big question for the day? Are you willing to be called all those things that Christ would be called? I should include myself in that as well, are we willing to be called all those things? Because if we are willing to be Jesus' hands and feet in the world, we will be. A whole way of thinking and doing needs to be swept away and not everyone is going to like that.

But how do you start? I remember as a 20something year old, my parents finding my habit of only wanting to earn the money I needed for the life I wanted quite vexing. I should be taking on extra shifts in the holidays, not mucking around with an excess of leisure time! But I wonder if 20something year old Tristan was onto something. He had a pretty clear idea of how much he needed and what enough was. I think that is perhaps the first thing we need to do. Remember when we have enough. Then stop striving for more. And if we, collectively, as a society, stop fighting to be the top dog with the most stuff, maybe we might find to our great surprise that there is actually enough to go around.

That's a start.