

**Sunday, July 5<sup>th</sup>, 2020, Pentecost 5A**

**Readings: Genesis 24: 34-38, 42-49, 58-61, 62-67 Psalm 45:10-17, Romans 7:15-25a, Matthew 11:16-19, 25-30**

## **Beyond Rivalry: Living Lightly**

### **Introduction**

In the BBC series, "Rev", one episode, deals with the question of human rivalry. It all begins well. Pastor Darren needs a bigger church building to accommodate his young evangelical congregation. Father Adam, needs money for his struggling working-class inner-city congregation of St Saviour's Hackney. Could they work together? They both need each other, together something might happen that is greater than either. But, the signs of hostility escalate. The initial lightness in the relationship becomes heavier. The rivalry appears to be grounded in God, in their particular theologies. But there is a sense here that the rivalry is really anthropologically, humanly based. The digs, especially from Darren, have to do with his own hubris, his own sense of power. Without even the felt-need for concealing, for camouflaging his real motives, Darren declares victory over the prize, St Saviour's, shaming Adam into surrender with the manipulative words: "Be God's friend Adam". In return Adam shuts down, exercising his prerogative as Vicar to unilaterally end the arrangement. Again, theological weapons are used: Adam's rejection of conservative evangelical views on women, not to mention the gay issue. But again, this is primarily a human thing, with theological guns brought in as ammunition.

The point here is this: that rivalry marks all power relationships; and that while myriad reasons are used to rationalize, to mask the process; it is our *humanness* that drives it.

### **The Reading**

With that thought, let's turn to the Gospel reading and dig down a little. Let's ask three questions.

*First*, there is a stark accusation that Jesus makes against his society: "But to what will I compare this generation? It is like children sitting in the marketplace, calling to one another, <sup>17</sup>'We played the flute for you, and you did not dance; we wailed, and you did not mourn.'" What is it all about?

Jesus is pointing to what generates human culture, this human phenomenon of rivalry. He alludes to a common game that children played: a game of back-and-forth between boys and girls in the streets. The boys would lead the wedding dances and the girls the funeral processions. This, was a game where gender difference is underscored, loudly declared; and where these children are anticipating their role in the adult world, mocking each other for the functions they will soon play.

Jesus attack is about how reciprocity, mutuality has broken down. Jesus is suggesting that things have got out of kilter, social arrangements have collapsed into mutual recrimination. But we can even go further than that. Jesus appears to see John the Baptist as caught up in this dynamic. To the violence that John condemns - the exploitive violence of the elites against the poor - Jesus concludes that John offers no more than *more* violence: final, sacred violence, God's judgmental violence, to even things up. This is where Jesus parts company with John. In place of God's anger, Jesus offers God's healing and forgiveness. Moreover, Jesus is inviting John to cross the Rubicon, to become a non-violent agent of God. In short, there has to be an end to violent rivalry. Someone has to initiate it. Jesus appeal to John is this: "Let it be us"!

*Second*, what does Jesus mean when he adds in his private statement to God, “Thanks for hiding these things from the sophisticates, and for revealing them to infants, to the little ones”?

In thanking God for revealing his approach to infants, Jesus is referring, not to infants as such, but to those who have not been fully socialised into rivalrous violence, those who have not been initiated into the cultural boundary systems, the purity systems, where rivalry stands as the foundation for everything. These are the people who hear him. These are the people who follow him. They are people who refuse to allow rivalrous-ness to define them. They may be a minority. They may be a motley bunch...in fact they were...from Galilee of all places. But they are there.

*Third*, what is the saying about “my yoke is easy and my burden is light”, or better put in the modern version, “Keep company with me and you’ll learn to live freely and lightly.”

The word used for easy, an “easy” yoke, is “chrestos” It is used several times in Matthew’s Gospel but also in Paul’s writings. It refers to kindness, it is a relational thing. In other words, in bearing a yoke designed by Jesus, we copy him, we copy him in a relational kindness with others, we break the social practices of the day, where we mindlessly copy the spirit of destructive rivalrous-ness. And why is the way of Jesus light? Because we escape the burden of slavishly copying, mindlessly competing, vacuously craving. Rather than be a vassal to rules, religious or secular, social or economic that reinforce our sense of identity by determining who we think we are not; Jesus invites his generation, and us, to live lightly, to tread deftly, to walk independently and joyfully: in other words, to copy him.

This is a theology, a philosophy, a strategy that is counter to today’s practice. It is a counter-vailing behaviour, a behaviour that challenges the norms to which most of us have well and truly surrendered.

*Girard: Our world is filled with rivalry, frenzied ambition in every domain. In Western nations, and above all in the United States, it animates not only economic and financial life, but scientific research and intellectual life as well. Despite the tension and the unrest it brings, no one, or almost no one, any longer thinks of forgoing rivalry, since it allows us to go on dreaming of a still more glittering and prosperous future than the recent past.”*