



3 July 2011
The Second Sunday after Trinity
Sung Eucharist
Romans 7 vv. 15–25a
Matthew 11 vv. 16–19, 25–end

Playing the Game

By The Rev'd Duncan Dormor, The Dean

On this weekend (by which I mean) Wimbledon Finals weekend in 1879, an Anglican clergyman named John Hartley a parish priest in Yorkshire made something of a strategic error. Predominantly a player of real tennis, he assumed that he would be knocked out of Wimbledon in the early stages of the competition and would not need to find someone to take his services on Sunday. He was wrong and having won his semi-final faced a 500 mile round trip to complete his Sunday duties before travelling back at breakneck speed to SW19 for the final which he won, a title he subsequently defended.

Many generations have passed since the world of Hartley – with practice on the rectory lawn, full length cream flannels, modest rewards and the amateur air of genteel sportsmanship. The world of Nadal and Federer and Murray is shaped by such different forces that it is difficult to even think about making comparisons: It is not the same game. To some extent that is broadly true for every generation, every peer group or cohort of people – we inherit a different world, with a distinctive landscape and set of influences, we are subjected to different experiences: whether it be growing in the shadow of THE War; hearing that ‘the times they are a-changing’ in the Sixties or being born into Thatcher’s Britain; they, we, share different loves and may have different mannerisms, language, enthusiasms, music – and alongside that work from different assumptions and expectations about how to live and what is important.

If all the world’s a stage’ as Shakespeare put it and ‘all the men and women merely players’, there’s been an awful lot of scene changing decade by decade – the game and how it is played has been transformed.

So what are we to make of today’s gospel reading in which Jesus seeks to address ‘this generation’? Can his words speak across generations and down the centuries?

Jesus’s commentary on his own times starts with a wonderful comparison which draws on the world and experience of children. Much of children’s natural play involves mimicry of the adult world and playacting. In today’s gospel they are playing at ‘weddings and funerals’ – playing the pipes to accompany the dancing at weddings and wailing and doubtless beating their chests in lament for death. Their ‘play’ touches on the defining moments in traditional adult life and the associated range of human emotion and experience – the exuberance and joy – the sorrow and loss.

The criticism lies with the failure to join in, to participate in the human ‘game’: you did not dance; you did not mourn

Such is Jesus’ criticism of the guardians of adult society, the Pharisees and others, that they have rejected both John the Baptist, the ‘funeral’ game – the call to repentance, that is to a laying down of pride and self-sufficiency; laying down the claim to definitive knowledge, but they also reject the wedding game – stopping their ears to the melodies of grace, to the notes of free acceptance sung out by Christ to which all may respond – by rejoicing with and accepting others – outside the magic circle of acceptance – as fellow-travellers, as neighbours, as children of God as we are.



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In Jesus's critique, 'this generation' is engaging in mean-spirited and 'bratty' behaviour – unable to contemplate its own shortcomings; unwilling to welcome others to the dance. Rather they sit 'in the gods' engaging in that very adult form of moral judgment on the 'inappropriateness' of both Jesus and John. Standing on their dignity and self-righteousness, they are the 'wise and intelligent', those whom the author of *Proverbs* describes as 'wise in their own sight',

In contrast to the often defensive and excluding games that adults often play, Jesus rejoices in turning things on their head with his description of his own disciples as 'infants', as 'little ones' reminding those who would be followers that they must be like children to enter the kingdom of God. Like children we must be prepared to be free, to participate, to join in the game; join in with the everyday aspects of life. On Friday I saw a wonderful picture of Michelle Obama and the 80 year old Desmond Tutu doing press-ups to raise money for charity. Does Tutu not realise that it isn't dignified for an 80 year old man to do press-ups? Of course he doesn't and he would laugh at the idea.

This is what Jesus is driving at – to be a true follower of God is to be a real lover of humanity which means that rather than children mimicing and learning to be adults we should in certain key ways look to children as a model of how to be human: to rejoice freely and to realise that there is something deeply grace-filled about the innocence and abandonment of play, trusting that we are held in the very depths of our being by one who loves us beyond measure and the rules of any game we might seek to invent.

Amen