

CHICHESTER CATHEDRAL

Date:	5 July 2026
Service:	Eucharist, Fifth Sunday after Trinity
Preacher:	The Revd Canon Dr Earl Collins, Chancellor

Today's Gospel passage comes from the 11th Chapter of St Matthew. Jesus had received messengers from John the Baptist who had been arrested and put in prison. In jail, John was undergoing anxiety about whether Jesus really was the one he had believed to be sent by God. Jesus therefore sent back reassurances for John and then compared himself to the Baptist. John, he said, came fasting in the desert and people accused him of being possessed by a demon. As some might nowadays say, he seemed to be 'Off his head.' Yet when Jesus came eating and drinking, they accused him of being a glutton and a drunkard. You could say, again in our terms, that both he and John simply couldn't win.

Such an attitude is all too common. I once knew a school principal who often had to attend meetings away. When he went to the meetings, some would say, 'We have such a terrible principal – he's just never here!' But when he didn't go to the meetings, the same people said, 'We have such a terrible principal – a real control freak. He just never goes away!'. Jesus too was no stranger to that kind of criticism, no stranger to the petty mean-mindedness of his opponents, especially the most fervently religious ones.

On many occasions his enemies tried to trip him up with trick questions, for example: should they pay taxes to Ceaser? If a woman had married seven brothers, each of whom died to whom would she be married in the next life? Why did Jesus' disciples not ritually wash their hands before eating? And so on. But a remarkable

thing about Jesus was his ability to change the nature of a conversation, to use a trivial or irritating question to lift it up to unexpected heights.

That is what he does in the second half of this passage, one of his most sublime utterances. Jesus stops speaking to the crowd and instead addresses his Father, the Almighty and eternal God. In that moment he suddenly shows himself to be far more than just another rabbi arguing with his opponents, more than someone defending himself against sophistic traps. What he offers is not argument about trivia but revelation of the truth. Our English word 'revelation' comes from a Latin one meaning to draw back a veil, to let what is concealed behind it be seen. That is what Jesus does here.

He begins it with a prayer: 'I thank you, Father, Lord of heaven and earth.' Jesus invites us to listen-in, to observe his prayer, which is a conversation with God his Father. He gives us a momentary glimpse behind the veil, into the inner life of the Holy Trinity. And he gives thanks that God has hidden himself from the wise and intelligent and revealed himself to mere infants.

That is quite a claim. There have after all been millennia of human reflections on what God might be like. The wise ones of India and China, the great Greek philosophers, poets and mystics of all kinds, have wrestled with that mystery. But, Jesus tells us, it was not to those great sages that God revealed himself, or at least not as fully and perfectly as he reveals himself through him. They were all people who explored divine wisdom, but Jesus is more than that.

He is God's eternal Wisdom, his Word and only Son. To learn the wisdom that Jesus brings it is not enough simply to be intelligent or clever. No human achievement can bring forth this wisdom because it is pure gift. It comes to us only through God's goodness, his gracious self-revelation, his turning to us through his Son whom he sent because he loves us. Jesus, Word-made-flesh and splendour of

the Father, is God's most perfect Word. He is his last Word to us, his fullest revelation of who God is.

One sometimes hears people wishing, 'Oh, if only God would speak to us in our day!'. Or some yearn for visible signs such as relics or the famous Shroud of Turin. But we do not need anything like that. We have been given all that we need. The Spanish mystic, John of the Cross, wrote that God only speaks one Word – eternally – and that Word is his Son, Jesus Christ, who came to us in time. He is all we need to hear because in Jesus God perfectly expresses himself and no more is required. That was echoed by the Anglican priest-poet George Herbert, who said to God, 'Thy word is all - if we could spell.'

'Thy word is all.' But to read that Word we must learn to spell. That often means unlearning what we learnt before: wrong ideas about God based on poorly digested religious education that was perhaps badly delivered. And above all, it means unlearning the dominant ethos of our society and the most foolish myth of the modern world: that the only reality is what we can see with our eyes and touch with our hands and measure with our scientific instruments.

To receive God's Word, the person of Jesus Christ, change must happen. We must become infants. We must enrol as children in the school of Christ and learn who he is by acquaintance and experience. To be a disciple is to be taught by Christ, a learning that comes not from cleverness but from faith and love, prayer and suffering. One comes to know him only by surrendering to him.

Only with Jesus and from him can we learn what God is really like because no-one knows the father except the Son or the Son except the Father. That is why Jesus was sent – to draw aside the curtain and reveal the heart of God. St John in his Gospel, tells us that Jesus comes from the heart of the Father. In Christ's gentle and humble heart we encounter God the Father's kindly heart.

Finally, Jesus promises us something if we do follow him. If we take upon us his yoke, he assures us that we will find rest. Unlike the legalistic burdens laid on people by some Pharisees – ancient and modern - his yoke is easy and his burden light. To surrender to Christ is not to be subjected to the iron dictates of a law, but to awaken to freedom and joy, the joy of the Holy Spirit – the joy of love. In all the tumult, restlessness, and turbulence of the world and of our lives, what human beings yearn for most is rest.

It is that rest that Jesus promises: peace of mind, inner stability, courage to deal with all life's difficulties, no matter what they are, and the satisfaction of our deepest yearning, to love and be loved. Only God and union with him can fully grant us that peace.