

## Contrary kids....

Matthew 11:16-19 & 25-end  
Romans 7:15-25a (Message version)  
Zechariah 9:9-12

A short while ago, Paul and I found ourselves in sole charge of his 2 ½ year old grandson for the day. Noah is a lovely kid, but like most children of that age he very definitely has a mind of his own, and a certain amount of skill is required to prevent catastrophic meltdown. We were, it is fair to say, a tad anxious.

Our Plan – going to Atwell Farm Park – worked well. The morning passed like a dream. Lunch was eaten. By 2pm we had started to breathe more normally.

And then we took his shoes off so he could go on the outside trampoline-pillows. And he promptly stepped into a puddle.

Soggy socks....

They didn't stop the bouncing, but when we tried to get the shoes back on – well, that was when the trouble began.

Did he want clean socks? "No"

Did he want wet socks in his shoes? "NO!"

Well, let's change your socks then "NO!!"

Do you really want wet socks in your shoes? "NO! NO! NO!!!"

Impasse. And it had all been going so well, too...

And I guess we've pretty much all been there. Either with our own children or grandchildren, or with nieces, nephews, children or grandchildren of friends.....

Contrary kids.

Jesus was no stranger to contrary human beings. He's clearly also seen contrary kids – Whatever one group wants to do – play music, be sad - the other group wants exactly the opposite.

Not to mention contrary adults, who criticised John the Baptist for his isolated and frugal lifestyle, and yet also criticised Jesus for enjoying food and drink and being with people who enjoyed a good party. I dare say that on Palm Sunday there were contrary followers of Jesus who really didn't get the idea of him riding into Jerusalem on a donkey – despite the prophecy of Zechariah that we have just heard.

Being contrary just seems to be part of the human condition...

That was certainly St Paul's experience. This morning we heard a different version of the NT reading as it's a bit easier to follow, but maybe you would also recognise the version we usually use, which contains these sentiments....

<sup>15</sup> I do not understand my own actions. For I do not do what I want, but I do the very thing I hate.... I can will what is right, but I cannot do it. <sup>19</sup> For I do not do the good I want, but the evil I do not want is what I do...

Being contrary just seems to be part of the human condition - especially when it comes to living as God intends us to live. What we call "sin" – itself helpfully paraphrased as "the human propensity to mess things up" - just always pokes its ugly nose in.

As we just heard

I know the law (*the way God wants me to live*) but still can't keep it, and if the power of sin within me keeps sabotaging my best intentions, I obviously need help! I realize that I don't have what it takes. I can *will* it, but I can't *do* it. I decide to do good, but I don't *really* do it; I decide not to do bad, but then I do it anyway. My decisions, such as they are, don't result in actions. Something has gone wrong deep within me and gets the better of me every time...."

Anyone else recognise this? Whether it's resisting a second piece of cake (more of a Weight Watchers sin, perhaps, than a spiritual one), or being snappy, or gossipy, or ignoring someone who's different from us - sometimes we can feel powerless when it comes to doing the right thing.

As Paul puts it

"I've tried everything and nothing helps. I'm at the end of my (~~rope~~)-tether."

And from there it's easy to slip from guilt into despair and so down the slippery slope of feeling more and more inadequate, and less and less able to live in the way God intends us to.

But Paul doesn't take this route. Instead he says

"Is there no one who can do anything for me? Isn't that the real question?"

And straight away, he finds that he knows the answer....

"The answer, thank God, is that Jesus Christ can and does. He acted to set things right in this life of contradictions where I want to serve God with all my heart and mind, but am pulled by the influence of sin to do something totally different."

Yes – it's hard. But the answer is not to look to our own failing strength and creaking will-power, but to look to Jesus.

Jesus – who through his life shows us how God intends us to live

Jesus – who through his death on the cross has made it possible for us to be forgiven  
Jesus – who through his resurrection offers us a new life  
Jesus – who loves us so much that he never, ever, gives up on us – even when we give up on ourselves  
Jesus – who through his Spirit gives us help and support as we work with him to live out what we believe.

And what does this look like in practice, I wonder?

Who's been watching Wimbledon? Or the Ashes? Or enjoyed a good drama on the telly? Or any other activity which involves human beings doing something to the best of their ability?

Does it just happen? Does Andy Murray hit that incredible millimetre-perfect shot just inside the baseline through sheer will-power? Does Ben Stokes carve that six out of nothing just because he thinks it's a good idea? Does your favourite actor deliver that moving speech just because they did?

Of course not. They practise. They learn. They use all the tools at their disposal. Training sessions. Coaching manuals. Watching and talking to others who have more experience. Identifying where they are going wrong, and changing it. Reflecting on what could be better, and learning from it.

And they have a 'coach'. Someone whose job it is to help them, support them, encourage them, point out where they are going wrong and suggests ways to improve. Someone who has a whole array of ideas and methods and tools to help them become the best they can be.

And so it is with us. When it comes to watching someone with more experience – we have Jesus as our example. "What *would* Jesus do?"

Rather than a coaching manual, we have the scriptures. The Bible contains epic tales, songs, the story of God's love and the way back to God – and also a good deal of practical wisdom on how to live

"Do not let the sun go down while you are still angry"

"Whatever is true, whatever is honourable, whatever is just, whatever is pure, whatever is pleasing, whatever is commendable, if there is any excellence and if there is anything worthy of praise, think about these things."

"Be transformed by the renewing of your minds." *Let God change the way you think, the way you see the world, so you're back in tune with him. Then it's easier to know how to live as he intended.*

Our training sessions include our sermons and the times when we come together to learn, through words or service.

And most importantly - we too have a coach in this Christian life business. Say hello to the Holy Spirit – sometimes referred to as the advocate, or helper – someone who is on our side.<sup>1</sup>

Someone who works with us and within us. Helping us to apply scripture to our own lives. Gently reminding us when we're getting into bad habits, and setting us straight again. Prompting us to think "what would Jesus do in this situation" – and being with us, giving us the strength, when we commit to doing it. In short - helping each of us to become who God always intended us to be.

Sometimes we experience the Spirit at work in unmistakable ways. Illuminating a passage of scripture and saying "this is for you - now" or maybe giving us generous words to say in response to something hateful levelled at us.

But more often than not, the Spirit speaks to us through each other. That sharing of a story. That word of encouragement. That gently expressed thought that maybe there's a better course of action than the one we're set on.

We are all different and the Spirit will speak to us in different ways, but if we are to live in the way God intends us to, then we need to be alert and open to the promptings of our Holy Spirit coach – and willing to act on them.

We won't be changed magically. But as we work in partnership with the Spirit we **will** be changed.

And I think this is what Jesus is getting at at the end of our Gospel passage where he says that his yoke is easy, and his burden is light. Instead of striving harder and harder in our own strength, we work in partnership with his Holy Spirit, and miraculous changes happen.

Contrary no more.

You may be wondering what happened with Noah and his soggy socks. Remember that idea that sometimes the Spirit prompts us to think of a different course of action from the one we're set on? He's a tiny slip of a child so we carried him to somewhere where he could sit and be happily occupied until the socks dried out. And we put his shoes back on.

Contrary no more.

So may we work in partnership with the Holy Spirit as we seek to grow into being the people God has called to be, living lives which give glory to God.

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<sup>1</sup> All of us – not just the super-spiritual ones!