

Heavenly Father, thank you for sending us Jesus your Son. Help us to wrestle with his word and apply it to life. Amen

- Who are the favoured children of God? Are you one of them? Am I one of them?
  - Nestling like a little chick under the warm protective wings of the mother hen, Jesus?
- Well of course we are. We're here because we believe and trust in him. And we know that's true because we are nice clean Westerners who have good table manners and know how to behave in company.
- That's not a million miles away from those other children, the children of Israel, to whom Jesus was speaking in today's Gospel reading. They knew they were God's chosen people, his favoured children.
- But thinking of yourself as a favoured child does not always bring the affirmation from Jesus that one might hope. He said of the favoured children of Israel, *'To what will I compare this generation? It is like children sitting in the market-places and calling to one another, "We played the flute for you, and you did not dance; we wailed, and you did not mourn."*
- I wonder if Jesus was pointing to a well known children's game 2 000 years ago? Perhaps a bit of a copying game like Simon says? Or a response game like 'What's the time Mister Wolf?'
- Whatever, he is implying that the favoured children cannot be satisfied. They didn't like the demands of John the Baptist, who came with a very strict and sparse lifestyle. No Friday night beer for him! And they didn't respect Jesus who pointedly enjoyed a party and didn't care whom he mixed with. After all, he certainly didn't keep good company, so he can't be a prophet!
  - There's just no pleasing the high standards of the favoured children!
- And that might be OK if those standards really were that high.
  - But I find that however respectable I try and be - or worse - however respectable other people expect me to be, the less secure I feel.
  - You see I do battle with my greedy desire for food. Many of you will know that if there is a last chocolate biscuit on the plate it is a battle for me to refuse it.
  - Actually it's quite good if I can restrict my sinful actions to an innocuous chocolate biscuit or two.
  - Because that means I don't have to think about my other decisions which cause untold suffering to people on the other side of the world. Those choices about lifestyle. The warm house. The cheap clothing. The fruit flown over from New Zealand. The support for an immigration policy which keeps refugees in camps. The investments in companies with a poor track record in human rights.
  - Because after all, I am a favoured child of God, ... and they are not. ... Are they?
  - And I'd like to get it right and do everything, but it's just too much, and I'm too busy and it wouldn't make any difference anyway. It's all just too big!
- St Paul paints a wonderful illustration of this condition in his letter to the Romans, which we've been looking at on and off over the last few weeks. He says, *'I do not understand my own actions. For I do not do what I want, but I do the very thing I hate.'* If the world were a better place, I might have more of a chance, but wherever I look, whatever I do, sin is creeping at the door. So I'll focus on cutting down on chocolate biscuits and not worry about the unnamed mine workers in South America whose appalling lives I am keeping in suppression by investing my pension in dubious mining companies. I don't know their names so they don't really matter. They do give me a good return, and surely that's more important.
- If I don't think too deeply I don't get too weary and heavy laden about it all.
- Cut to the chase and see St Paul's solution to all this. It's in the very last verse of today's reading. *'Wretched man that I am! Who will rescue me from this body of death? Thanks be to God through Jesus Christ our Lord!*
- Unsurprisingly it's Jesus who gives us the solution. But how does he help?
- Which verse in our Gospel reading is the one that sticks out for you? If you are anything like me, which I hope for your sake you are not, you listen to a passage from the bible in church with a look of knowing concentration on your face. But unfortunately most of it skates straight over the top of your head. You just hold on to a

phrase of two, normally the easier and more comforting phrases. And if we take a straw poll, I bet that the majority of people identified with the verse which I half quoted a couple of minutes ago. *'Come to me, all you that are weary and are carrying heavy burdens, and I will give you rest.'* That's a wonderful verse. Take the weight of life that we carry and give it to Jesus. The double standards that we live by. The self-centred knowledge that we are not nearly as wonderful as we think we are. Plus all the responsibilities that weigh so heavily on our shoulders. Take all this and hand it to Jesus.

- How does that work then?
- I want to suggest that actually it is the verse before which holds the key to the whole thing.
- *'All things have been handed over to me by my Father; and no one knows the Son except the Father, and no one knows the Father except the Son and anyone to whom the Son chooses to reveal him.'*
- God the Father, whom Jesus calls Dad, Αββα, sends his Son to draw close to us in our misguided attempts to live good lives, that go so horribly wrong. Jesus shows his closeness to his Father in heaven by calling him dad, which for the Jews, who dare not pronounce the name of God at all, would have been shockingly familiar.
- And whatever else he did or didn't do on earth, he certainly experienced the heights and depths of human life. Partying in Cana, eating meals with prostitutes, sleeping under the stars on his travels with his disciples and dying on a cross in disgrace in Jerusalem. He was sort out and ignored, honoured and abused, victimised, beaten and bullied as well as invited to speak in synagogues and entertained by kings.
  - He knew life all right. Life in all its glory and shame!
- So he is the one trustworthy link between heaven and earth. God become man. God come close.
- He came to save us.
- He did this by by proving the lengths God is prepared to go to for his sinful chosen children by dying on a cross.
- The lengths he is prepared to go to for all humanity.
- If he hadn't died, we would never have known and God would have stayed distant, at least one step removed.
- He wouldn't really have known what it was like for his people to live under such double standards as we do.
- How dangerous it is because we might fall off the tightrope and be found out for what we really are.
  - Those heavy burdens that tie us down were what killed him.
- But they didn't tie him down. His love overcame them. He knows what we're really like and he still loves us.
- And the proof of the power of that love is resurrection. He has rescued St Paul from *'this body of death'* and he rescues us in the same way.
- So I have the choice. Either I can hold this promise of rescue in the bank of my mind ready to redeem when at last I meet Jesus on judgement day and then produce it, sure of his love, and enter the Kingdom of God with a skip and a light heart, forgiven, redeemed and unloaded from the burdens I've been carrying the whole of my earthly life. I've not yet started dancing to the tune of the flute but at least I'm thinking about putting on my dancing shoes, so I'm ready!
  - That's fine but is going to have certain repercussions. The most obvious being that although I might be comfortable I will still be carrying those burdens throughout the whole of my earthly life. And if you, as I do, a sense of judgement about the present pandemic, then I might be caught napping and the judgement will not be all that favourable.
- So the alternative is that I can start wrestling with the promise of resurrection now, and bring the Kingdom that little bit nearer by starting to dance when the flautist calls and taking steps to make my double standard life less duplicitous and more honest, and thereby shedding one of two of the burdens on my shoulders. And if I manage it just a little bit, the dance will surely have begun, the Kingdom will surely be that much nearer and my halting steps, so often out of time with the music, will be moving to a tune where meaning and forgiveness and acceptance flood over me like a flood of fresh water in a dusty land. Life will be lighter and I will know that I truly am one of God's favoured children.
- *'Come to me, all you that are weary and are carrying heavy burdens, and I will give you rest.'*
- What tune are you going to choose? And how will you demonstrate it.