

Sunday 5 July 2026 - Hope and comfort – Michael Bayley

Michael Bayley finds comfort and hope in today's Bible readings, and shows us how our faith can be a source of solace and resolution.

Readings:

Zechariah, 9: 9-12. Romans, 7: 15-16. Matthew, 11: 16-30.

Sermon: Hope and Comfort – Michael Bayley

One of the most traumatic events in the history of Israel took place in 587 BCE when Jerusalem was captured by Nebuchadnezzar, king of Babylon. The city including the temple were destroyed and all except the lower classes were deported to Babylon. However the Persian king Cyrus 2nd who conquered the Babylonians in 539 BCE had more lenient policies towards conquered people and he allowed those Jews who so wished to return to their homeland and rebuild the Temple in Jerusalem. Just how many did actually return to Jerusalem we do not know but for those who did it was tough going. They faced much opposition and they were all too aware that the temple they were trying to build was a pretty miserable affair compared to the glorious temple that had been destroyed. Zechariah was active during this period. His book has many of the usual predictions of a wonderful future and destruction for the Jews' enemies but you may have noticed verse 9.

Lo, your king comes to you; triumphant and victorious is he, humble and riding on an ass, on a colt the foal of an ass...and he shall command peace to the nations.

This is such a contrast to much of the rest of his book. Of course Matthew quotes this in his account of Jesus' arrival in Jerusalem. What I had not realised until I read Borg and Crossan's *The Last Week* is that the style Jesus' entry to Jerusalem on a donkey was in complete contrast to the entrance at the same time on the other side of the city of Pontius Pilate, the Roman governor at the head of a column of imperial cavalry and soldiers who had come to try and make sure that there was no trouble during the Passover Festival.

When I read this passage I caught a glimpse of a more hopeful future in a place where I did not expect it.

The Psalm set for today is Psalm 145. A verse of that stood out for me (v.8):

The Lord is gracious and merciful, slow to anger and abounding in steadfast love. The Lord is good to all, and his compassion is over all he has made.

Steadfast love translates the Hebrew *heseth*, which conveys God's overwhelming loving kindness. There is a confidence here that I find reassuring.

Let's look at what Paul has to say in this morning's reading from his letter to the church at Rome. Paul did not underestimate himself. He generally appears supremely confident in his ability, zeal and his complete conviction that he was right and his opponents were wrong. Consider what he wrote to the church at Corinth when his authority was challenged:

Are they Hebrews? So am I. Are there Israelites? So am I. Are they descendants of Abraham? So am I. Are they servants of Christ? I am a better one... With far greater labours, far more imprisonments, with countless beatings, and often near death. Five times have I received at the hand of the Jews the 40 lashes less 1. Three times I have been beaten with rods; once I was stoned. Three times I have been shipwrecked; a night and a day I have been adrift at sea; on frequent journeys, in danger from rivers, danger from robbers, danger from my own people, danger from the Gentiles, danger in the city, danger in the wilderness, danger at sea, danger from false brethren; in toil and in hardship, through many a sleepless night, in cold and exposure... The God and father of the Lord Jesus knows that I do not lie. [2 Corinthians 11:22-31]

Compare that with what he writes in this mornings' reading from Romans. He is lamenting that the Jewish Law does not have the power to rescue him from the all too human struggle he finds in himself. He writes:

The Law in itself is holy and the commandment is holy and just and good. But I am not: We know that the law is spiritual: but I am not: I am unspiritual, sold as a slave to sin. I do not even acknowledge my own actions that's mine, for what I do is not what I want to do, but what I detest... For I know that nothing good dwells in me... for though the will to do good is there, the ability to effect it is not. The good which I want to do, I fail to do; but what I do is the wrong which is against my will... Wretched creature that I am, who is there to rescue me from this state of death? Who but God? Thanks be to him through Jesus Christ our Lord!(Romans 7:14-25)

I am always struck by this passage – the apparently confident Paul acknowledging in a heartfelt way his struggles to lead the life to which he knew God had called him and then his affirmation at the end that Christ has rescued him from ‘this state of death’. He immediately rams the point home in the next chapter: ‘It follows that there is now no condemnation for those who are united with Christ Jesus. In Christ Jesus the life giving law of the spirit has set you free from the law of sin and death’. [Romans 8: 1f]

Surely grounds for hope. In this mornings' reading from Matthew I think it is fair to say that it starts off by Jesus showing his irritation with his detractors who criticise him ‘like children in the market place’ whatever he does. ‘John came neither eating nor drinking, and they say: “He has a demon”. The son of man came eating and drinking, and they say: “Behold, a glutton and a drunkard, a friend of tax collectors and sinners!”’ [11: 18f] The reading gives us two responses to that. First, following Jesus is not about being clever, especially not being clever clever. Jesus says: ‘I thank you, father, Lord of heaven and earth, for hiding these things from the learned and wise, and revealing them to the simple’. [11: 25]

Second the reading ends with what must be one of the most well known sources of Jesus' encouragement and consolation.

Come to me, all who are weary and heavy laden and I will give you rest. Take my yoke upon you, and learn from me, for I am gentle and humble hearted and you will find rest for your souls. For my yoke is easy and my load is light. [11: 28-30]

Those of you who are familiar with the Book of Common Prayer will recognise one of the 'comfortable words' from the communion service.

When I sat down to write this sermon I was feeling overwhelmed not only by the wars and crises and disasters and the obstinate refusal of leaders to listen to one another, but also a strong sense, reinforced by the ferocious heatwave, that, thanks to us humankind, nature itself is out of joint. I had no idea what to say. So I looked at the set readings to see what they might tell me. In them I found not so much answers as consolation: quiet hope and encouragement for the road ahead. I hope you may find the same.

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