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# Running Towards Christ

**Sermon • Rev'd John Shoaf • 9 July 2023**

Genesis 24:34-38,42-49,58-67 • Romans 7:15-25a • Matthew 11:16-19,25-30

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May the words of my mouth and the thoughts of our hearts give glory to you, O Lord. Amen.

Jesus' mission was not an easy one. He came, as John said, "to what was his own, and his own people did not accept him" (John 1:11). Jesus met with a variety of reactions from the people he encountered on his travels, from great faith to simple indifference. Many people followed him; many more dismissed him or even chased him away. Some were frightened by his message of truth, love and faith. Some reached out to him and were rewarded, like the woman who had suffered from haemorrhage or the blind men asking for their sight to return; others reached out and then pulled back after learning what following him might mean, like the rich young man who obeyed the commandments but could not give up his wealth.

Some were like the ones Jesus talks about in today's Gospel:

They are like children sitting in the marketplaces and calling out to others:

‘We played the pipe for you,  
and you did not dance;  
we sang a dirge,  
and you did not mourn.’ (Matthew 11:16-17)

These are the people who hear Jesus' word, but do not seem to react in any way. Jesus is relating them to little kids play-acting in the streets, playing games where they pretend to be holding a wedding, or a funeral, and getting other kids to play along. But the other kids just look on, and don't want to play.

And yet what Jesus had to offer his people was simply *everything*. Joy. Love. Life itself! How can they not accept this? How can his people not grab hold of it with both hands? And many of us wonder about that today. We don't understand why the churches aren't full, particularly in these troubled times. Jesus is everywhere, here and now. All you have to do is to reach out to him, and salvation and eternal life are yours!

But this is not accepted by many people. They cannot see the salvation that Jesus promises, and they don't take that first step towards Jesus which is so essential. Taking that first step opens you up to the working of Christ in your soul. As the psalmist says, "Taste and see that the Lord is good; blessed is the one who takes refuge in him" (Psalm 34:8). So they can't believe in heaven or eternal life, since they can't see it and they won't let God's Spirit in to give them that knowledge.

And if you don't believe in heaven, then you don't believe in hell either. There is then nothing beyond this world, as far as you're concerned. In fact, you have no basis for morality. Some people say that Christians do good because they are afraid of hell. I think for most of us, it is more for the reward in heaven, and because, with the Spirit inside us, we naturally act towards each other as Jesus would have us act. We know the difference between right and wrong because the Spirit is in us, and we were taught well as children by those who also had the Spirit in them. Without the Spirit guiding our lives, and without the prospect of heaven to encourage us, we would not be moral people.

As Paul writes in the letter to the Hebrews:

Therefore, since we are surrounded by such a great cloud of witnesses, let us throw off everything that hinders and the sin that so easily entangles. And let us run with perseverance the race marked out for us, fixing our eyes on Jesus, the pioneer and perfecter of faith. (Hebrews 12:1-2)

We are running a race, fixing our eyes on Jesus as our goal. And we are not alone: those Christians whom we know today, and those who have gone before us, are

witnesses to Christ's faithfulness; they are our "cloud of witness" which continually encourages us.

The consequences of not having Christ before us as our goal, and not having the support of our fellow Christians, are clear. Right and wrong become relative and eventually are ignored. What drives the rioting we see today in France, and the unrest in other European countries? Or violent demonstrations in the US and other places? Is it a fight for justice? Only in part. For many, maybe most, those who smash shop windows, destroy businesses and homes, and steal whatever they can get their hands on, it is simply lawlessness. Without God, there is no compelling reason to obey man's laws. Without Jesus as your goal, it doesn't matter what you do or whom you hurt. You are alone and you're only looking out for yourself.

Yet we should not despair. Why not? Because we have Jesus as our goal. With Jesus there is always hope — hope for ourselves, for our families, for all those around the world. We should never doubt that God is working in the world, even when so many deny God. Remember what Jesus said:

I am the good shepherd; I know my sheep and my sheep know me — just as the Father knows me and I know the Father — and I lay down my life for the sheep. I have other sheep that are not of this sheep pen. I must bring them also. They too will listen to my voice, and there shall be one flock and one shepherd. (John 10:14-16)

Jesus knows us, and Jesus knows every single person in those demonstrations and riots. They are his people, as are we. There shall be one people, one humanity. When will we see this? We don't know. But we know that Jesus is working, pulling together all the loose threads, stitching us all into one beautiful garment for himself. In the meantime, we pray, we follow our faith, and we show that little piece of our world that is Christchurch what it means to live in the Spirit. Thanks be to God. Amen.