

**We played the flute for you, and you did not dance; we wailed and you did not dance.
(Matthew 11:16)**

Jesus invites us to join the dance, the joyous dance of the Christian life in the Kingdom of God. What is there not to like? But strangely, as he found then and as we see now, many refuse. Jesus' words remind me of the Mock Turtle's dance song in *Alice's Adventures in Wonderland*:

"Will you walk a little faster?" said a whiting to a snail,
"There's a porpoise close behind us, and he's treading on my tail.
See how eagerly the lobsters and the turtles all advance!
They are waiting on the shingle—will you come and join the dance?
Will you, won't you, will you, won't you, will you join the dance?
Will you, won't you, will you, won't you, won't you join the dance?"

The snail had good reason to be slow, he feared that being thrown into the English Channel he would wash up on the French shores – and as snails are a delicacy in France But the whiting dismisses the snail's fears and replies:

Then turn not pale, beloved snail, but come and join the dance.
Will you, won't you, will you, won't you, will you join the dance?
Will you, won't you, will you, won't you, won't you join the dance?"

Of course, there are many risks of faith but the whiting is right: if we don't join the dance then we deny ourselves the enjoyment of the gifts of God's love and peace now and in the future. As the whiting says to the snail:

There is another shore, you know, upon the other side.
The further off from England the nearer is to France.

In Jesus' example the children in the market square are inviting their friends to join in with their dances for a wedding, 'we played the flute' or at a funeral procession 'we wailed'. But their friends are not interested – 'you did not dance and you did not mourn'. It doesn't matter what the children offered the others, they are just not interested.

In the same way Jesus' opponents are neither interested in John the Baptist's stern message of asceticism nor in Jesus' message which rejoices in the delights of the world.

Who are these people who won't play and who reject whatever version of religion they are offered? Jesus refers to these people as 'this generation' (Mt 11:16). 'This generation' are not just those who are hostile to religion or those who are threatened by it but the indifferent.

This has strong resonance with 'this generation' now in our country today. As our declining church numbers suggest, fewer and fewer people have a religious faith. Now, I can understand why some actively reject a belief in God and I can also understand why some find religious belief and practice threatening, in both cases this gives us room for discussion and debate. But what poses the greatest challenge are those who are indifferent to religion, those who are neither negative or positive but just have no interest in joining.

One 20 year-old writer, a Oxford theology graduate, not himself a Christian but very committed and intrigued by Christian faith, commenting on this indifference concludes that religious apathy is now the default position amongst his generation, the so called Generation-Z (18-30 year olds). Here is what he says:

One of the feelings that transmits to me most strongly when I attempt to probe into my acquaintances' religious beliefs, or even attempt to engage them in theological discussion, is a sense that there is little point discussing or worrying about religion... young people in particular, if they do not believe that religiosity is a relevant factor for them and society at large, are likely to retain their stance of being non-religious without trouble. (*Religion and Generation Z* p 28)

So, what is the answer? I don't want to play the popular well-being card, but actually the Christian faith does offer well-being but at a deep spiritual level and at a time when mental health issues are on the rise especially amongst Generation Z, then it is not intellectual arguments that we should be offering but the power of spiritual sustenance through prayer, music, poetry, literature, art – which the Church has in abundance.

One young person in the book I mentioned writes about the power of church music and the words of the traditional liturgy which brought him to faith as a 20-year-old.

Jesus ends his address to this generation with these wonderfully simple but powerful words:

'Come to me, all you that are weary and are carrying heavy burdens, and I will give you rest. Take my yoke upon you, and learn from me; for I am gentle and humble in heart, and you will find rest for your souls. For my yoke is easy, and my burden is light.' (Mt 11:28-30)

We sometimes make religious faith sound difficult, but at its heart it is easy – it lifts life's burdens - because God's love is gentle, inclusive, sustaining, healing and non-judgemental. That is what is being offered in the Christian dance; so let's join the dance!

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