Sermon for the 4th Sunday after Trinity (Year A)

'The Generation Game'

I wonder how many of you remember the lyrics to the song that begins: "Life is the Name of the game, and I wanna play the game with you. Life can be terribly tame, if you don't play the game with two." If you do, I imagine that you are probably over 40 years old. It is of course the theme tune to the popular 1970s/80s television game show, *'The Generation Game'*, hosted by Mr Bruce 'Nice, to see you, to see you…nice!' Forsyth.

I very much doubt if any of the present generation would have guessed it, let alone heard of either the programme or the game show host. It's also highly improbable that you would find any of them attending church on Sunday. The current generation born in the late 1990s and early 2000s and aged between 8 and 23 are known as Generation Z - the Internet generation.

Every generation has had a tendency to compare and contrast the present with the past, and generally judge the other unfavourably. I will return to the subject of Generation Z later in my homily.

In today's gospel reading Jesus addresses and critiques his own generation and asks: "But to what will I compare this generation?" (Matthew 11:16). The narrative is specifically directed at how Jesus' generation perceived John the Baptist, who prepared the way for Jesus, and Jesus himself. The current generation appeared unable to grasp who they really were and what they represented. They could only judge what they had observed; for example the way that they behaved and how they dressed.

Jesus using a parable describes them "like children sitting in the market-places and calling to one another" (Matthew 11:16). They were like squabbling children who couldn't agree with each other (just as children do!).

> We played the flute for you, and you did not dance; we wailed, and you did not mourn. (11:17)

The children played cheerful songs and their friends refused to dance; when they played mournful tunes, their friends refused to cry. In the culture of the time, there were gender specific roles. Men performed the round dance at weddings accompanied by flutes. Whilst at funerals, mourning was done by women. Commentators suggest that the parable may represent the girls rebuking the boys for their unwillingness to play their respective games of 'weddings', and 'funerals'.

In Jesus' parable his present generation had critiqued and rejected John the Baptist because to them he was countercultural - he lived frugally and was teetotal. "For John came neither eating nor drinking, and they say, "He has a demon" (11:18). Likewise, they had also dismissed Jesus because of the company that he kept: "The Son of Man came eating and drinking, and they say, "Look, a glutton and a drunkard, a friend of tax-collectors and sinners!" (11:19).

The First Century generation had essentially dismissed both John the Baptist and Jesus as being irrelevant purely on the basis of how they behaved. Jesus responded saying: "Wisdom is vindicated by her deeds" (11:19). Likewise, today we have a saying "Actions speak louder than words". It is people's outward actions – how they behave that speak volumes about what they believe.

Let's take a look at Generation Z. It's all too easy to misjudge them. The Economist Newspaper[1] described them as:

> A more educated, well-behaved, stressed and depressed generation in comparison to previous ones.

We need to first understand them if we want to adequately engage with them and draw them into the Church. Unlike many of us who grew up in a Christian culture; they have grown up in a completely Post-Christian culture; the majority of their parents are not Christians and therefore apart from what they have learnt at school or observed from the behaviour of Christians that they have met, they have little or no understanding of the Church and Christianity. According to one report[2] it is concerning to read that:

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[1] The Economist February 19th 2019 https://www.economist.com/graphic-

[2] Tim Chester and Steve Timmis 'Everyday Church, Mission by Being Good Neigbours'

> "70% of the UK population have no intention of ever attending a church…. The vast majority of un-churched people would not turn to the church, even if faced with difficult personal circumstances or in the event of national tragedies"

There is however a glimmer of hope and reason to be optimistic; those who have studied Generation Z have reported that whilst Generation Z appears to be sceptical of organised religion, they are not anti-God or anti-Jesus. There is an openness to explore spirituality. One report stated:

> Individuals who have grown up as part of Generation Z have little or no history with God, the church or the Christian faith. It is important to note that Generation Z have not so much rejected God as much as they just have never really 'met' Him in the first place[3].

Therein lies the challenge for the Church - how do we enable this present generation to meet with God? One question that we might ask of ourselves is how does our behaviour attract or repel others? Are our lifestyles sufficiently Christ-like and counter-cultural to cause others to ask why and want to find Jesus for themselves?

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[3] https://reignministries.co.uk/gen-z-what-every-church-needs-to-think-about/