



## **A Homily by The Right Reverend Susan J.A. Bell**

Sunday, October 4, 2020  
The Feast of St. Francis of Assisi

Scripture Passages: Galatians 6:4-18 & Matthew 11:25-30

*+ In the name of God: Father, Son and Holy Spirit. Amen.*

Did you perk up when you heard the last couple of verses from Matthew's Gospel this morning? I know I did when I first read it this week. And the old familiar warm feeling when these words are spoken or sung spread over me too. They are well known – some of the best-known words in the New Testament really. They've been spoken in assurance by believers since they were written down. They've been immortalized in music – perhaps most memorably by Georg Friederich Handel in Messiah in the beautiful tag-team aria where first soprano and then alto sing these verses.

For me, these are words rather like the Aaronic blessing – The Lord bless you and keep you, ... or like John 3.16 "For God so loved the world, . . ." They are beautiful, even poetic expressions of God's love for his children.

But rather like the aforementioned verses, there's more to them than mere assurance and comfort. But you knew that, right? Because the God who loves us more than we can reasonably conceive, is also the same God that challenges us constantly – keeps us moving, never complacent.

So what starts out sounding relaxing and inviting begins, when we take a close look at the language to sound just a little more complicated.

Let's start with Jesus' language: the words sound with just so many light and heavy strokes. Rest, light, easy, heavy burdens, weary, yoke, and there's that word again, burden.

So what's the context for these words? They are couched in the terms of an invitation. It sounds like a gentle invitation to be relieved: relieved of burdens and called into rest. This invitation gives emotional comfort.

But it also causes us to ask questions such as:

Who, for example, are those who labor and are heavy laden? What is their labor, and with what weight are they burdened? Furthermore, why would a disciple's relationship with Jesus be described as a yoke? And, how can a yoke be easy and a burden light?

So who are they who carry heavy burdens in life?

Scholars read this in two ways I've discovered. First of all, they say that it's a reference to all who seek truth and so this applies to all people. Humankind, generally, has labored and become heavy laden in the search for truth. Just think about the rows and rows of books about emotional, spiritual, and personal seekers after truth in your local Indigo store. And then think of Job who is asked, "Can you search out the deep things of God? Can you find out the limits of the Almighty?" (Job 11:7).

Jesus, boldly, and in keeping with God's plan of salvation, says that he is the true incarnation or embodiment of God -- and so is also the path to God. And so scholars read these words to say, finally, the burden of seeking (but not being able to find) eternal truth has been lifted, because we find it in Jesus the Christ.

But I think there's another interpretation of that question that lies closer to us. Who are they who are carrying heavy burdens? I think the answer to that one is easy. It's all of us. Each of us has burdens – burdens of conscience, regrets or wounds that we carry round with us.

And I think those burdens feel heavier – and perhaps a little more numerous in the middle of a pandemic than ever: the burden of worry is among the heaviest. Worry about health, finances, sustainability. Worry about our relationships – not being able to see people and care for them as we'd like, worry about energy levels and workload. These are burdens indeed.

So when Jesus says, 'Come unto me', may we hear that invitation differently now – maybe we're paying a bit more attention these days.

Because the fact is, Jesus' invitation is the antidote to stress and despair. And the basis for Jesus' invitation to come to him is the bare fact of who he is. Just prior to the invitation that begins in verse 28 he lays his credentials out. He says:

"All things have been delivered to me by my Father, and no one knows the Son except the Father. Nor does anyone know the Father except the Son, and the one to whom the Son wills to reveal him."

In other words, like father, like son. Jesus invites us as the Son of God to lay our burdens with him.

And did you notice the number of times that Jesus refers to himself – 10 times in 5 verses – he’s making it absolutely clear that it is his relationship to the Father that produces blessings for those who follow him just in case we might have missed that.

We must come in humility like children, not like those who know it all and feel they’ve seen it all – knowing that all we have before God is faith. Well, I don’t know about you, but there’s nothing like a Pandemic to reveal that to you. I think we’ve learned that everything else is ephemeral. Hard for us who depend so much upon our things, but there it is. The truth, the bare, unvarnished truth is that we come before God with nothing but faith.

And now we come to a slightly complicated, but a realistic bit of these verses. So far we’ve looked at, “Come to me, all you that are weary and are carrying heavy burdens, and I will give you rest.”

But in this next bit, Jesus speaks of his yoke and his burden. “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.”

This is my “wait, what?” moment. You notice we aren’t promised no burden and no weight in life simply because we follow Christ?

Nope.

No easy answers here folks. And I’m glad really. Because I would suspect that Jesus was peddling fairytales if he had promised us no burdens. That’s just not the case is it?

I have so little patience with versions of the Gospel that offer spurious claims of prosperity and success in life in exchange for belief. That’s just not how God works. And you and I know, that’s not how life is. It’s not our lived experience. We can’t say that because you believe in the Father and the Son and the Holy Spirit that burdens will disappear. We can only say that they will become easier and lighter.

And that’s true on two levels: it’s true that our search for truth finds its home in Jesus – and we are relieved of that burden for sure – that addresses the first kind of heaviness that we carry. But the burden, however, has not been completely eliminated. Even though Jesus equates the Christian life with spiritual rest, he still proclaims that we must wear his yoke and bear his burden but they are easy and light.

Traditionally the symbol of the yoke was seen as an emblem of oppression, possibly of slavery. The Jews used the term “yoke” for entering into submission to something. They spoke of the yoke of the law, the yoke of commandments, the yoke of the kingdom, the yoke of God, etc. But Jesus takes this old symbol and does something different with it.

The imagery of the yoke in Matthew 11: 28-30, is borrowed from another meaning: the image of the wooden bar placed across the shoulders of a couple of oxen in order to join their strength together to plow a field.

And like the yoke that joins two oxen together where they share the strain of the work and double their power, Jesus' yoke makes the work of carrying the burdens in life and walking in God's ways manageable or do-able. And that makes that yoke a blessing. It's why St. Paul's words in his letter to the Galatians today are so confident; he boasts in nothing except the cross of our Lord Jesus Christ.

I suppose the idea that Jesus – and St. Paul - are trying to communicate is one that we find in our own prayer book where it says, that God's "service is perfect freedom." Many people think that if they serve God they will lose their freedom. In fact, it is the very opposite. Living for ourselves is, in fact, a form of slavery. Serving God 'in the new way of the Spirit' is the way to find perfect freedom.

Today we celebrate the life and witness of St. Francis of Assisi. Progressively, through his short life – he died at the age of 44 – he learned what it was to live to God – not to himself. He found freedom from his earthly worries by yoking himself to Jesus. Now, he was a saint. But surely we can lean in that direction as the people of God understanding that the answer to stress and the unbearable weight of our burdens in life is to yoke ourselves with Christ.

So these words, "come unto me," so full of comfort, so familiar, so poetic, are also words that have profound meaning for us. They are words that point to a way of living that is a bold statement of love: of God's love for us. It's not a call to heaviness, but a call to a lightness of being in Christ.

*+In the name of God: Father, Son and Holy Spirit. Amen.*