



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

The Feast of St. Francis – October 3, 2021

Scripture Passages: Galatians 6: 14-18; 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, but by no means exclusively by George Frederick Handel in *Messiah* in the beautiful tag-team aria where first soprano and then alto sing these verses. I have sung them many times.

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. 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.

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?

Who are they then, who are carrying heavy burdens? Well that's easy - it's all of us. Each of us has burdens – burdens of conscience, regrets or wounds that we carry round with us. Burdens of worry, burdens of fear – especially in our recent past.

When I was younger, I'm not sure I understood these words well. When I was younger, I was relatively free of burdens – that was my privilege. But now that I'm older and have the baggage to prove it – and drag it around with me, they seem to me to be to be very bold words, a very real attempt to describe, or name the dysfunction that we humans can easily fall into.

So now, I know that I carry heavy burdens. We all do. And it's these that Jesus invites us to hand over to him and to get out of the darkness of that weight and to live instead in the light of his grace and his truth and follow God's way instead of our own self-centred ways. And yet, it's still a tough sell – even though we know all of this.

So when Jesus says, 'Come unto me', I hear that invitation differently now.

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 Jesus 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." 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.

So who takes up Jesus' invitation? Looking back a little farther we find that even though all may come to Christ, all do not. It's interesting, but Jesus says only "infants" were willing to receive the truth concerning Christ, but the wise and prudent were not. He's probably referring here to the religious leaders – those considered wise and intelligent - who were filled with their own wisdom and learned ideas and were blind to who Jesus was and therefore missed the invitation and the new thing that the Father was doing through him.

I suppose the lesson here is that only those who are willing to depend wholly on Christ and trust only in Him like little children will be able to come and receive his blessings.

We must come in humility – knowing that all we have before God is faith. Everything else is ephemeral. Hard for us who depend so much upon our things, but there it is. 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. 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. 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 easy and light.

And this is where it gets interesting, because 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.

Now 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, old symbol, and does something different with it. The imagery of the yoke in Matthew 11: 28-30, however, 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 and create even more to plow a field. In the same way, we are yoked with Christ

And he helps us in our spiritual struggle.

And like the yoke that couples oxen together, Jesus' yoke makes the work of carrying the burdens in life and walking in God's ways manageable or do-able. And that makes the yoke a blessing. I think that's why St. Paul says, "May I never boast of anything except in the cross of Jesus Christ!"

I suppose the idea that Jesus is communicating 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.

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.

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