

Take up his yoke and discover ...

... just how easy the yoke and how light the burden

A reflection given on the Fourth Sunday of Trinity, 5th July 2020, by the Vicar, the Revd Canon Jonathan Baker in the Online Service

Matthew 11:16-19, 25-end

Well, it's good to be back in the minster, back in this pulpit. After three and a half months away, I'd wondered what it would be like. But it's good: except, of course, that there's no congregation - apart from the curate who's here under orders to provide technical support. But I'm on my own in here and so that is a bit strange, finding yourself in a huge empty church, high up in the pulpit, preaching to a winking red light on a camera, and just having to trust that there is a congregation behind the camera.

It's not a bad illustration of faith: I'm sure there is a congregation, but at this stage, I can't see you and I can't prove that you're there; but I'm carrying on as if it is true; that there are people out there willing to listen as I speak from this pulpit. In other words, I'm living by faith. And this morning's gospel reading is an invitation to live by faith. "Come to me," says Jesus, "All you that are weary and carrying heavy burdens, and I will give you rest." That's an attractive invitation, I suggest. Probably most of us most of the time feel a bit weary and as though we are shouldering burdens that we would love to put down. And Jesus promises rest.

I think a lot of people at the moment are feeling weary: this lock-down has been exhausting, even for those who initially didn't find it too bad. But some have been burdened with loneliness and isolation; some have been burdened with extra work as they cover for colleagues on furlough; we've been separated from the people we love; some, of course, have been struggling with illness or bereavement. I think all of us have been burdened with a sense of uncertainty and anxiety about the state of the world and what the future holds, and I don't know if it's just me, but a lot of people seem to have got a bit 'scratchy' - we've been cooped up for months; one way or another, we've all had enough of it, and as we emerge, blinking back into the light, a lot of people seem to be feeling 'out of sorts' and not always knowing why. We've seen it in the news with reports of gatherings turning violent as the police

have tried to disperse people who aren't social distancing. We've seen it a bit here at the minster when we first opened the doors and a few people just feeling a bit cross that the church had been closed for so long. So we find ourselves burdened with feelings which don't feel good and which we don't know how to handle.

And Jesus says, "Come to me, all you that are weary and carrying heavy burdens, and I will give you rest." But how do we do that? What does it mean to come to Jesus? We can't see him; we can't prove he's there; we don't know whether he really can give us 'rest'. Is there any real substance to this promise? I notice that Jesus doesn't suggest we should come to him simply because he invites us: in the verse immediately before that invitation, he says, "All things have been handed over to me by my Father and no one knows the Father except the son, and anyone to whom the son chooses to reveal Him." So I think what Jesus is saying here is that if we come to him, he won't just give us a bit of rest so we can recover from a 'bumpy patch' - it's much bigger than that: he's saying he can put us in touch with the Father; with the one who made us; and is the source of all of life; and is the one towards whom our lives are directed; and who waits for us.

Jesus is promising to reveal to us the deepest reality in the universe; the thing that is most important; the perfection we are made to seek and to know; the object of all our striving and yearning. Come to me, Jesus seems to be saying, and you don't just get a nice 'rest': you get satisfaction for the soul; you get the deep peace of knowing you have been welcomed by your creator; you get to know you have a place in the scheme of things; that the universe is ultimately friendly and not hostile; and that you matter.

So how do we put this promise to the test? What are we supposed to do in order to come to Jesus? What he says might be a bit surprising. He says, "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." So here's the thing: this promise of 'rest' isn't quite what it sounds like. The way to 'rest', according to Jesus, is to take up a yoke - and the yoke is a symbol of labour and of servant-hood: milkmaids and servants carry heavy loads using a yoke; beasts of burden pull the plough using a yoke. The yoke is not an obvious symbol of 'rest'. But Jesus insists, "My yoke is easy and my burden is light." - but it is still a yoke.

So I think what he's saying is that the 'rest' he offers isn't a temporary distraction - it's not like a weekend at a health spa or a holiday on the Greek islands; the 'rest' Jesus offers isn't an add-on; the 'cherry on the cake' you can choose to add if the fancy takes you, without it disturbing the rest of your life. It's not an offer of personal freedom: it's an offer of 'home'. It's not an offer of self-fulfilment: it's an offer of love. And to respond to this offer and take up this invitation and to come to Jesus means to take his yoke upon ourselves; to make ourselves answerable to him; to call him Our Lord; and to place ourselves under his authority.

It sounds crazy; it sounds counter-intuitive; it challenges our sense of freedom; of making our own choices; of determining our own futures. But he comes to us in word and sacrament and invites us to come to him, and to follow his example in humble, loving service, exchanging our freedom for life and for true rest.

And taking up the yoke of Jesus requires an act of faith: you have to trust that this promise of rest will be kept; you have to be willing to suspend disbelief and live as though it is true. And then you will know that peace that passes understanding, that rest from which you can act with grace and confidence, that wholeness which brings healing and reconciliation.

So come to him; trust him; hand over all your burdens of weariness and frustration and anxiety; take up his yoke in joyful exchange; and discover for yourself just how easy it is and how light the burden of his work.

Reading Text

Matthew 11:16-19, 25-end

¹⁶ "But to what will I compare this generation? It is like children sitting in the marketplaces and calling to one another, ¹⁷ "We played the flute for you, and you did not dance; we wailed, and you did not mourn.' ¹⁸ For John came neither eating nor drinking, and they say, "He has a demon'; ¹⁹ the Son of Man came eating and drinking, and they say, "Look, a glutton and a drunkard, a friend of tax collectors and sinners!" Yet wisdom is vindicated by her deeds."

²⁵ At that time Jesus said, "I thank you, Father, Lord of heaven and earth, because you have hidden these things from the wise and the intelligent and have revealed them to infants; ²⁶ yes, Father, for such was your gracious will. ²⁷ All things have been handed over to me by my Father; and no one knows the Son except the Father, and no one knows the Father except the Son and anyone to whom the Son chooses to reveal him. ²⁸ "Come to me, all you that are weary and are carrying heavy burdens, and I will give you rest. ²⁹ 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. ³⁰ For my yoke is easy, and my burden is light."