

Sermon Trinity 5 Year A 2023

Zechariah 9.9-10, Romans 8.9, 11-13, Matthew 11:25-30

Pulling with Jesus

I wonder if you remember when you first heard a piece of scripture and what effect it had on you – it might make for an interesting course. The first time I heard the words from today's gospel was as a teenage boy at communion – it was a prayer book communion service and as many of you may remember it is used as words of invitation “come unto me all ye that are heavy laden and I will give you rest” At different points in our lives the weight of our little worlds and our little problems and burdens can seem like the world upon our shoulders – they are not of course but that does not in the eyes of God belittle them for us at that time. Today's gospel is indeed like a big hug from Jesus – especially for those who feel the weight of the world on their shoulders. He goes on - “Shoulder my yoke and learn from me, for I am gentle and humble of heart, and you will find rest for your souls” in our translation. All of us need this invitation yet not all accept it.

The invitation uses the image of a 'yoke' familiar to farmers through the ages and even in our own day where beasts of burden are still used to plough the land and prepare for something new to happen. Perhaps not so familiar to those of us today whose food burden is lifting bags into the boot of the car. However the curved gently moulded wooden beam placed over the neck of two animals (oxen or horse) to enable to pull cart or a plough can still be seen on the walls of country pubs and in illustrations of nursery rhymes as jack and jill go over the hill to fetch a pail of water often using a yoke. The 'yoke' was often used as a biblical symbol of the bondage and oppression from which God had delivered the enslaved people of Israel. From

Leviticus: 'I am the Lord your God, who brought you out of the land of Egypt, that you should not be their slaves; I have broken the bars of your yoke and made you walk upright' (26:13).

It seems part of the human condition that often that which is offered to set us free itself become a yoke or burden. In the age of the computer internet and smart phone tools are designed to make our life easier – they can. However is it not also true that they can become burdens and tools of oppression – think of the constant gazing of some at the phone, compulsion to instantly reply to the media message and anxiety of some lest they not be liked enough or even insulted on the snapfaceagram.

In Jesus's time the Torah, or Law of Moses, originally intended to help the Israelites to walk in the way of the Lord as a free people, had become another yoke, another form of oppression. Like social media in a way it became abused and misused. Religious leaders had added a whole plethora of man-made rules and regulations – many hundreds added to the Ten Commandments God gave to Moses. It is not a phenomenon confined to the judaism of Jesus's day of course we can see it at work in some islamic societies of our own day and others – and even secular authoritarian states with their own rules that serve the party before people. Jesus saw it in his time as an insupportable burden on the shoulders of the people. Growing up in Nazareth, Jesus lived and worked among ordinary people. He had first-hand experience of their struggles and frustrations. His deep empathy reached with compassion and kindness, healing their sicknesses, dispensing God's mercy, casting out demons, and giving them hope.

Jesus rebuked the Scribes and Pharisees for crushing people with impossible demands, without ever lifting a finger to ease the burden and desired their freedom. But of course with freedom comes choice. He revitalised the Old testament call of the

prophets to choose life not death. So he invited them to surrender to his loving embrace and accept his gentle 'yoke'. And he promised them that, if they gave themselves to him, they would find peace and solace for their weary hearts. It is a yoke of selflessness and finding freedom in service and a peace the world cannot give.

He makes the same invitation and same promise to us today. There is not soft selling it can be hard yet just as the yoke is usually for two – we will never carry it alone – he does the heaviest lifting. Embracing 'yoke of Jesus' means choosing the values and standards of the gospel, not those of the world around us that invites the casting aside all restraints and creation of our own values with our own truth which becomes entirely relative .

In a world of materialism, relativism and individualism, embracing the 'yoke' of Jesus is demanding, however we are not left to pull in our own strength. Jesus is always with us. We are 'yoked' to him always there with gentle and humble heart'. Unlike the masters we might be tempted to serve such as wealth, power or fame – pulling with Christ does not enslave us. It frees us. Paul reminds us, in our second reading, that the Spirit of Christ is living in us, enabling us to resist the downward pull of our unspiritual selves and embrace the invitation and challenge of Jesus. Trusting in the Spirit and going all the way with Jesus is never a burden, but a constant source of liberation, peace and joy.

Come unto me all who are heavy laden and I will refresh you. Let us thank God for this invitation to be fed and refreshed today and let us pull together with Christ and find peace and freedom.

The Revd Fr. David Wylie RN

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