

Cotham Parish Church
Sunday 9 July 2017

Zech 9:9-12
Rom 7:15-25a

Matt 11:16-19, 25-30

Our gospel reading from Matthew contains what strikes me as one of the most beautiful sayings in the New Testament:

*Come to me, all you that are weary
and are carrying heavy burdens,
and I will give you rest.
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.*

I am sure we all feel weary at times, and carry burdens that we would be glad to put down. Here is a welcome invitation to rest. And yet, as the invitation goes on, something of a paradox emerges.

*Take my yoke upon you, and learn from me...
and you will find rest for your souls.*

Having been offered rest, we discover that we will find it through taking a new yoke upon us. Couldn't we just do without a yoke – after all, the prophets of the Old Testament – Isaiah and Jeremiah – spoke of breaking every yoke, not taking up new ones.

Well the key to understanding this paradox is found in the surrounding chapters of Matthew's gospel.

Wherever Jesus goes he is criticized by the scholars and Pharisees for what they see as his rather sloppy observance of the Torah. In this reading Jesus refers to their criticism of what he eats and drinks, and who with. In the following chapter he twice comes into conflict with them over what true Sabbath observance means.

Jesus is infuriated by their failure to see the wood from the trees, to distinguish between the letter and the spirit of the law – and the crippling effect their rigidity has on the people. A few chapters later in Matthew Jesus denounces the scholars and Pharisees, saying:

They tie up heavy burdens, hard to bear, and lay them on the shoulders of others; but they themselves are unwilling to lift a finger to move them.
(Matt 23:4)

The very teachers who should be helping people in their lives and faith have no compassion, but instead are weighing them down and putting up barriers to their communion with God. 'Go and learn what this means,' Jesus says to them, quoting the prophets: 'I desire mercy not sacrifice' (Matt 9:13 & Matt 12:7).

In his invitation Jesus is seeking to offer another way – to reach out in compassion to those who have been exhausted by legalistic piety. If you like, he is seeking to distinguish between 'good' religion, and 'bad' religion – between that which sustains and that which destroys.

Yokes don't have to be problematic. Yes, in the Old Testament they are often a metaphor for oppression and slavery. And yet the proper function of a yoke is to enable its wearer to better carry their burden, without strain or injury. 'My yoke is easy', says Jesus. This word translated 'easy' is the Greek word *χρηστος* (Chrestos).

And 'easy' is a strange choice by the translators, given that everywhere else in the Bible *χρηστος* is translated as kind, good, gentle or merciful. 'Easy' rather suggests that there's nothing to it. The original meaning of *χρηστος* in classical Greek was something that was suitable or useful – fit for purpose. This seems to make more sense here.

There is an enormous difference between carrying 20kg around in a plastic bag, and carrying the same weight in a proper rucksack. What you want is a good fit, so there's no chafing or cutting in. Waist and chest straps and a structure that spreads the weight. A soft padded material over your shoulders. That is a good yoke – a gentle yoke – a helpful yoke that helps you carry your weight with minimal discomfort.

Jesus the carpenter would have known how important it was to make a well-fitting yoke – the family business among the farmers of Nazareth would have depended on it. He would have been used to measuring the oxen carefully, then carving the customized yoke and covering it with leather, to enable the oxen to pull heavy loads.

There is even an ancient story from the Eastern Church that says that over the door of Jesus' carpenter shop was a sign that said: 'My yokes fit well'. I've no idea if this is true, but it's a lovely idea to think that in this invitation in Matthew's gospel to take his yoke upon us, he is drawing on his sales pitch as a carpenter: 'For my yoke fits well, and my burden is light.'

The point is, when you've got a weight to carry, a well-fitting yoke is far better than a badly-fitting one – or indeed no yoke at all. A good yoke will make the burden feel lighter.

So what is this yoke that Jesus speaks of? If it's not the yoke of oppression – of legalistic piety, what is Jesus offering instead?

Well, Jesus is drawing on another ancient metaphor for the yoke – the yoke of wisdom. For example, there are strong echoes here of a passage from *The Wisdom of Sirach*, written 200 years before Matthew's gospel:

*Acquire wisdom for yourselves...
Put your neck under her yoke,
And let your souls receive instruction;
It is to be found close by.
See with your eyes that I have labored little
And found for myself much rest.*

Sirach 51:26

For Sirach, wisdom stems from a knowledge of God and is life giving. Wisdom is compared to a yoke because it lightens the burdens of life, enabling rest and refreshment. In Matthew's echo of this saying, Jesus is being identified as a sage, like Sirach – a teacher of wisdom: 'Take my yoke upon you, and learn from me', he says.

But here we can see that something else is happening. While Sirach refers to Wisdom in personified form, Jesus identifies *himself* as Wisdom personified:

I will give you rest (not Wisdom will give you rest)...
Take my yoke upon you (not the yoke of Wisdom)...
Learn from me (not learn from Wisdom)...

In fact, Jesus has already hinted at this earlier in the reading, when he responds to the accusations about his eating and drinking by saying that 'Wisdom is vindicated by her deeds' – or, in other words, I will be vindicated by my deeds – for I am Wisdom. This identification with divine wisdom may not be as explicit as the Logos discourse of John chp I – but this is Matthew's version of it.

So the yoke that Jesus is offering his listeners is a means to knowledge of God that is personal – that comes through him rather than through books of law and their custodians:

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 (Matt 11:27).

And it is because Jesus is not just the teacher and mediator of Wisdom, but the embodiment of Wisdom – is Wisdom itself, that he has the authority to reinterpret the wisdom of the Torah – for he is the Logos, the divine Word and Wisdom.

It is this that enables him in the two sabbath conflict stories that follow to declare that a compassionate concern for human wellbeing (for hungry disciples and a man with a withered hand) is a more authentic expression of the sabbath than a mere emphasis on abstinence. For he is 'lord of the sabbath' – and has unique access to the spirit behind the letter of the law. Likewise, he can give rest because he *is* rest. Can give life because he *is* life. He is 'the living bread in whom all our hungers are satisfied'. He is the end as well as the means.

But – as unexpectedly as Zechariah's victorious king riding humbly on a donkey, Jesus is also gentle and humble in heart. Humble enough – perhaps, not just to be the yoke – our well-fitting yoke, but to wear a yoke himself.

Perhaps he knows that his yoke is a good one because he's got it on too! The American theologian Barbara Brown Taylor has spoken of the 'Open Yoke':

Jesus is standing there right in front of us, half of a shared yoke across his own shoulders, the other half wide open and waiting for us, a yoke that requires no more than that we step into it and become part of a team.

The yoke has become a metaphor for relationship – of being connected to God by being voluntarily yoked to Christ, our yoke-fellow.

A theologian called Celia Deutsch has written an entire book on these verses. Her conclusion is that:

In Matthew the paradox of yoke and rest is rendered possible by the relationship of Jesus to his disciples and his continued presence with them. And this relationship assures the community that the yoke of Jesus' teaching does indeed lead to life.

So, what can we take from these verses?

Perhaps aspects of our own lives will come to mind – what burdens we are carrying, and what kind of yokes we are using to carry them.

For burdens of one kind and another are an inevitable part of life.

I'm reminded of words attributed to the author Frederick Buechner:

Here is the world. Beautiful and terrible things will happen. Don't be afraid.

Are our roles, relationships, resources a good fit? Are they equipping and enabling us to fulfil our responsibilities and ambitions?

Perhaps we will think of our society – of the burdens that fall on some more than on others and what we do about that.

Perhaps we will want to reflect on what kind of yoke the Church is offering to those who are weary and heavy laden. Is it – are they – are we adding new burdens or helping people to carry the ones they've already got?

Perhaps we will be encouraged by this open invitation of Jesus 'to all of those who are put off by the pretensions of human religion.'

Perhaps we will welcome the 'rest for your souls' that is offered by and through Jesus. Or rather the 'rest for your psyches' as the Greek puts it.

As St Paul laments in the reading from Romans, many of us do not have psyches that are at rest – where our conscious and unconscious wills are in balance – balance being another meaning of the Greek word for yoke [ζυγος / Zygos]. We may often feel more like an unyoked pair of oxen trying to pull apart.

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Amen.

Ed Davis

