

Pentecost 5 2020

Matthew 11:25-30

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In the last few months, one of the most common words I hear from people is that they are tired. Tired of endless news about COVID; tired of uncertainty; tired of having to be constantly alert to where we stand in relation to our neighbour – to be ‘socially distance from each other’. Just when we most want to be reaching out for physical human contact, we are going told to keep our distance.

Jesus says, ‘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’.

The metaphor that Jesus uses of the yoke is a rural one. The yoke is the wooden beam which goes across the shoulders of two oxen, which distributes the weight of the load they are pulling across their shoulders. When a new ox is learning how to pull a load, it would be yoked to an older more experienced animal. When that older animal moved in a particular direction, in response to the master’s command, then younger animal would learn which way to go.

That seems to be the way Jesus is using the metaphor. Jesus, the Son, hears the Father, and then responds. If we are yoked to Jesus, then we will also learn what it means to hear God the Father and move in the direction God commands. Remember, once again, that Father and Son here are *relational* terms, not gendered terms.

Now at this point, we could be suddenly be feeling another weight of burden – we might get all anxious and wound up and worry whether or not we are doing the will of God. And if we feel that way, then this is precisely where Jesus is asking us to relax. Because when that little active brain of ours starts accusing us with multiple expectations, or multiple failures, then we know that we have taken on a different kind of yoke – a more burdensome yoke.

Because the word YOKE was associated with load bearing, it was commonly used as an image of carrying burdens in life. In the prophet Isaiah, which Jesus like to quote often, the Yoke was an image for foreign oppression. When Zion is under threat from the Assyrians, God says, through the prophet Isaiah

*“his burden will be removed from your shoulder, and his yoke shall be destroyed from your neck”*  
(Isaiah 10:27)

In another place, the word YOKE is used in relation to the burden of religious ritual. In the famous Jerusalem Council recorded in Acts 15, there was a big debate about whether gentiles needed to be circumcised in order to become followers of the Jewish Messiah. After much debate, Peter stands up and says,

*“why are you putting God to the test by placing on the neck of the disciples a YOKE that neither our ancestors now we have been able to bear? On the contrary, we believe that we will be saved through the grace of the Lord Jesus, just as they will”* (Acts 15:10-11)

In some aspects of Jewish thinking to be ‘yoked to the law’ in the interests of the kingdom of God, meant complying with every detail of Torah. This could sometimes be a crippling psychological and

practical burden, and is no doubt why Jesus rails against the scribes and the pharisees at one point about *'laying heavy burdens on people's backs but not lifting a finger to help them'* (Matthew 23:4)

What do you find bears you down with a great load of expectation? Is it a little internal voice of expectation or accusation? Are you able to hear the voice of Jesus saying *"learn from me; for I am gentle and humble in heart"*.

Can we be gentle with ourselves during times of trial?

Maybe another little part of ourselves pops up and says, 'yes, but there is so much to DO'. I have a godly responsibility to build the Kingdom of God.

But of course we don't. The phrase, 'building the kingdom' is one that we could usefully lose from the Christian vocabulary. The New Testament never talks about us *building* the kingdom. When we look closely at the way the 'kingdom' language is used, it is always in terms of either something we ***enter into***, or something that is ***coming to us as gift (Jesus teaches us to pray, 'your kingdom COME'***.

When we pray our word, 'ma-ra-na-tha', we are praying for the kingdom to come, which is simultaneously for Jesus to come.

We know what a huge challenge this is to our egos. It feels so inactive, so passive. Suddenly I am not heroically BUILDING anything. I am simply being WITH Jesus, learning from him in gentleness and humbleness of heart.

Do not worry. Do not be afraid. No doubt God will make good use of us in surprising and unexpected ways. But for now, Jesus invites us to simple pause – and trust him. Give him our burdens. Let him do his work in us.

Amen.