

## 5<sup>th</sup> Sunday After Pentecost, 9<sup>th</sup> July 1017, Sermon by Br Luke efo

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Well it has been a struggle to write this homily. First, I couldn't decide which passage to choose. Did I speak about Rebekah being found as the wife for Isaac? It has so much imagery in it, that it was tempting.

Then I thought perhaps I should really spend some time exploring St Paul's letter to the Romans with you. For once he seems to say something so clearly modern and applicable to today, that it almost cries out for a conversation. Verse 19: "*For I do not do the good I want, but the evil I do not want is what I do*". Sound vaguely familiar?

But then I looked again at the gospel and thought, the somewhat contradictory words of Jesus need exploring in more detail. So, I chose the gospel. Earlier on Matthew records that Jesus rebukes the people for their double standards, then he warns the towns about their impending doom. Then he moves to thank the Father for the revelations that he has given to the disciples. Finally, in verses 28 to 30 he says "<sup>28</sup> *Come to me, all you that are weary and are carrying heavy burdens, and I will give you rest.* <sup>29</sup> *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.* <sup>30</sup> *For my yoke is easy, and my burden is light.*".

Verse 28, can of course be read two ways. Those who have a heavy physical burden and those who have a spiritual burden. We perhaps go to the physical burden. Why? Probably because the mental picture we get when we hear the word yoke, is the piece of wood that two or more oxen use when they are put to the task of pulling. It looks cumbersome, heavy and must be a burden for the beasts to carry around their necks.

Or perhaps the image of the milk maid, or serving girl as she carries milk or water on ropes hanging from either side of a yoke she wears over her shoulders. We get the impression of heavy, difficult labour. But in the reality in both these images, is that the yoke being used here is designed to make the tasks they are doing easier.

If we switch to the spiritual yoke, we wonder what Jesus can be referring to? Well generally scholars say he was referring to the religious burdens the Pharisees had placed on the people. Here the yoke is not meant to help, but it is hindering. It is a sign of servitude and the wearer is bent double by the weight.

So, his words '*Come to me, all you that are weary and are carrying heavy burdens, and I will give you rest.* Says to the people, you don't need to carry your religious burden. The way I offer is not heavy with rules and restrictions. It will require work, but it will not be an unbearable burden. An idea that is both revolutionary and comforting at the same time.

<sup>29</sup> *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.*

In his manual "Advanced Training Techniques for Oxen", Assistant Professor Drew Conroy from the University of New Hampshire, says "When using the option of pairing a green animal with a trained ox, the trained animal acts as a restraint and helps calm the new animal. The yoke acts as a more rigid restraint than would a halter or lead rope. The green animal quickly learns to follow the more experienced ox."

So, Jesus is telling us, when we are yoked with Him. He will lead and teach us. And because he is humble in heart, we will find rest for our souls. The burden he places on us will not be that of the religious leaders, but will allow us the rest, to be nurtured, trained and encouraged by His love. He has moved his disciples understanding and experience of their faith from a state of heavy onerous physical work and intricate rules, to one of spiritual peace. Once again, the idea that is both revolutionary and comforting at the same time.

<sup>30</sup> *For my yoke is easy, and my burden is light.*' So, Jesus has told them, and us, that being yoked to him will not be a burden. We will find rest and now he tells us that the yoke is easy and light. Are these somewhat contradictory statements? No not really. Why?

Well because, we know the yoke is designed to make the task of pulling or carrying easier. Thus, our task is made lighter. As the inexperienced partner of the team, we will be taught by someone who will nurture us, and the spiritual rules we will need to follow are not onerous. They are encapsulated in two simple commandments, which you all know really well and I don't need to say them again. Do I?

Nowhere in all this imagery does Jesus say there will be no work. He doesn't say, "I will do all the work". He says he will join us, or rather when we join him, in the work, then the burden will be light. In many ways, the church today has duplicated the religious burdens of the 1<sup>st</sup> Century Pharisees. It has made the yoke heavy and burdensome. It has not allowed us to be yoked to the more experienced Jesus who will lead, train and nurture us.

The task of discipleship is not hard. But it requires work. It requires patience. It requires commitment. It requires diligence. It requires acceptance. It requires a willingness to learn. But look at the ease and speed with which a trained yoke of oxen works a field, or pulls a cart. The idea of being yoked to Christ, should then fill us, not with fear and confusion, but with joy, peace. And, yes, in this we will find "rest for our souls".