

Sunday Between 3 and 9 July

Matthew 11:15-19, 25-30

Jesus said, my yoke is easy and my load is light.

In our gospel reading this morning Jesus seems to be a little exasperated as he wonders what he has to do to avoid criticism. John came fasting and living in the wilderness and he was criticised, Jesus came eating and drinking amongst people, meeting their need where he found it, and he was criticised. It seems he really couldn't win! But then he asks his followers to just trust him and follow. He promises them a light load and an easy to carry yoke.

We can all identify with Jesus here, how often have we been in situations where others have misunderstood us or our intentions? Where we are trying to do a good thing and end up being cast as the bad guy for our trouble. How often have we also wanted to say to people, just watch me and have a little patience and you will understand what it is I'm trying to do.

We know that Jesus has all the answers, he is the incarnate word of God, we know that all we need to do is to trust him but we also fail to do that from time to time, preferring instead to trust our own judgement. And that doesn't necessarily lead to doom and gloom but it wouldn't be as good as if we had trusted God in the first place. CS Lewis wrote of God, Whatever you do, He will make good of it. But not the good He had prepared for you if you had obeyed him. We recognise that sentiment, we go our own way, but God is there, urging us back onto the path he had prepared for us by another route.

But as wonderfully comforting as it is to know that God cares about us and maintains a relationship with us which is always focussing on our needs, we must be careful not to push the logic of this passage of scripture beyond our experience. You see there are those who would support a theology based on successful people, it is referred to as the gospel of prosperity and it can become troubling. By this theory God chooses us by his grace and the way we know we are saved, and those around us are saved, is because they live easy lives, Jesus said my yoke is easy and my load is light. It is not much of a jump to assume that if Jesus promises to help us with our difficulties, then those people we encounter who have few difficulties are Jesus' chosen ones.

However, our experience will be able to throw up examples of Godly people facing indescribable suffering. We ourselves may be able to recollect times in our own lives when we have faced indescribable suffering. If we are not careful, we can be convinced that we are somehow responsible for our suffering, if we had prayed more, if we had done more, if we had put God first, somehow it would have been different. We can take this argument to its logical conclusion and blame all suffering on the sin or lacking faith of those affected.

This is a worry, it is rarely used for self examination and often used to explain to others how they went wrong to end up in such a bad situation, and it just sounds like passing judgement in disguise. Surely God was not sitting on his throne of judgement each time we had bad news to deal with. There are of course consequences to our actions, people who don't take care of their health will be more

likely to get sick, but plenty of people do look after their health and still get sick, and they are not to blame somehow because they didn't pray enough.

By doing it Jesus' way, by living according to his example, by learning from his teaching, we have a relationship with the almighty and our yoke is made easy and our load remains light not because pain is taken away, but because we have someone else there to carry it for us. Gone are the requirements of the law which stifle our expressions and experiences of faith, laws which take so long to learn and understand that we have forgotten the spirit behind their enactment, and instead all we need commit to is to accept the love of God, poured upon us by grace, unearned and impossible to lose by our own actions or inaction. From there we can show that same radical love to others. That is the mark of salvation. As St Paul tells us the fruits of the spirit are love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, gentleness and self control. We will bear those fruits as the spirit dwells within us.

Notice that the fruits of the spirit are not financial security, happy families, lack of pain and constant happiness. Jesus never promised that, but those true fruits of the spirit give us more of the attributes we need to be cheerful in the face of difficulty, to have ways of coping with suffering that we otherwise would not have. We are not inoculated by faith so as to never suffer, but rather we are treated by the almighty healer when we suffer.

St Paul's letter to the Romans as read this morning reminds us that we can do nothing Godly without God, Paul has come to understand that living a sinless life by following the law was impossible, and he should know, it was his whole focus before his conversion, and yet he knows, through Christ, that in spite of his failings he is redeemed. If he is redeemed in spite of his failings, if Christ sacrificed himself for us when we were still sinners as he did, then it is foolish to think that some failing has led us to make God turn from us, God never turns from us even when we turn from him, especially when we turn from him, that is often when the shepherd comes looking for his lost sheep.

Let us not then get caught up in worrying about sin, recognise it, yes, repent of it, of course, try to avoid it, naturally, but by his death and resurrection Jesus has already paid the price for it. We are never justified in looking for the salvation in others, it's none of our business, God sanctifies, we do not. And we need not live in despair because of our own failings. The light load on an easy yoke is Jesus' way of releasing us from our burdens of guilt and shame as well as suffering and pain. If the almighty forgives us our shortcomings, who are we to refuse to accept that forgiveness. I'll let CS Lewis sum up, he always does it so much better:

If God forgives us we must forgive ourselves otherwise it's like setting up ourselves as a higher tribunal than Him.

Let us then live with joy in the love of God, remembering that the help we need to bear our burdens is always there by prayer and the actions of the body of Christ in the world.