

Come You Who Are Weary

Sunday 5th July 2020

Readings: Psalm 45:10-17, Genesis 24 34-49, 58-67, Matthew 11: 1-6 & 28-30, Romans 7:21-25

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How enticing are the words of Jesus at the end of a busy week in a world of pandemic uncertainty and constant worrying news. ***“Come to me all who labour and are heavy laden and I will give you rest.”*** As we ponder the difference to our lives the solitude and slowdown of lockdown has made for us, it might be easy to recognise how easily we can become like Sisyphus in Greek mythology. Sisyphus was a king who used devious methods on the gods and humanity alike in order to achieve his goals of power, seducing women, and living forever. Greek mythology tells us that Sisyphus was punished by the gods for his deceit. He was cursed into rolling a boulder up a hill to the crest of a hill for all time, only to watch it fall just before he reached the top for all eternity. The endless futile struggle, never really getting there, never achieving the goal, always frustrated after constant struggle and effort. Or even like Solomon, the author of Ecclesiastes who lamented, ***“Then I hated all my labour in which I had toiled under the sun, because I must leave it to the man who will come after me. And who knows whether he will be wise or a fool?”*** (Ecc 2:18-19) What value then all our hard work when it can be gone so easily?

The apostle Paul also wrestled with frustration and failure. Not so much in material acquisition or ambitious goals but in moral character. In Romans 7:23-24 he writes, ***“I see another law in my members, warring against the law of my mind, and bringing me into captivity to the law of sin which is in my members. O wretched man that I am! Who will deliver me from this body of death?”*** Even, for all his good intentions and hard work, Paul failed to be the man he was striving to be. In his wrestling to be fully obedient to the Law, to what he knew to be true, he constantly came up short. Failure, hope frustrated, is demoralising and discouraging. No one wants to be living in that state.

How then can we experience something different?

Jesus continued, ***“Take My yoke upon you and learn from Me, for I am gentle and lowly in heart, and you will find rest for your souls. For My yoke is easy and My burden is light.”*** (Matt 11:29-30) This imagery of being yoked is an incredibly powerful metaphor which is worthy of some consideration, so too is the thought of lighter burdens.

What is a yoke? Literally, a yoke is an agricultural implement. It is normally constructed of a curved piece of wood, occasionally metal, and used to bind two animals together, generally oxen, for the purpose of binding them to traces so that they can draw a plough or some form of cart. In Hebrew the yoke was called an *‘ol*. Metaphorically, the Old Testament often used “yoke” in a pejorative form, a negative. For one to be “yoked” was one in submission to another. The punishment of Israel was that of an “iron yoke” in bondage and slavery, first in Egypt and later in Babylon.

Last week we mentioned that we all serve somebody. This is not the question. The questions here are who or what are you yoked to? And when Jesus calls us to take up His yoke, what does He mean?

For starters, a yoke could be a thing of pain or a comfortable tool. A modern parallel might be that of carrying water or groceries. I remember a few years ago thinking how horrible it was carrying full plastic bags from the supermarket. When they were heavy, they really seemed to cut into your fingers. The bags were a tool for the job and effective but certainly not enjoyable. Then I saw a small Chinese lady carrying her bags very comfortably. When I looked closer, I saw she had one of the most simply effective things I'd ever seen. She had two short pieces of rubber hose, cut lengthwise so she could slip the plastic bag handholds into them and then carry the plastic bags via the hose grips. Simple and brilliant! Similarly, an animal's yoke was normally shaped, carved and polished to perfectly fit the animals that were to wear it. This meant the load and pressure was spread appropriately and the animal could work comfortably. A yoke, made for the specific animal, to measure, was a wonderful thing.

A yoke, as opposed to a harness, required two animals, one each side. The two animals were rarely equally matched, in fact it was better not to have equally matched animals because then they would tend to compete. Not a lot of fun going flying off into the sunset dragged kicking and screaming by two animals who have forgotten their purpose and ignored what they were about to race each other across the plain. Instead an older, well trained animal is placed with a younger, sometimes stronger animal to train it. The older imparts wisdom, the young strength. Between them they achieve the goal and education is passed from one generation to another. Jesus tells His listeners that His **“yoke is easy and My burden is light.”** Who are we going to partner with? Who are we going to serve? Jesus. In being yoked with Jesus He shows us the right path and shares the load with us. His pace is neither too fast, nor too slow. He imparts to us Godly wisdom and insight and the results of our efforts bear fruit.

What does a yoked animal not do? It doesn't carry any other burdens. If it arrived with any it has to lay them down before it can be properly yoked and get on with the job. It would be near impossible to be burdened and work. The master takes the burdens so the animal can properly do what it is designed to do. Jesus points out that the great burdens of our lives are the ones that trouble our souls, that prick at our consciences, the regrets and guilt, the shame and wish-I-hadn'ts, wish-I-didn'ts of life. These are the burdens that constantly lift our stress threshold, constantly wear us down and undermine us. Sometimes these burdens feel impossible to deal with, too painful, too old, too embarrassing, too deep-seated. Jesus reflects so perfectly Psalm 55:22 as He tells us tells us, **“Cast your burden on the Lord, and He shall sustain you”**. This is why what Jesus says works.

Moreover, if we reflect on it, much of the stress and strain we have in life is because we have not made Godly choices and we are living with the consequences. If we reflect on how much the seven deadly sins have, or maybe still do, influence our life we may recognise why we are under strain. Gluttony, greed, sloth, envy, anger, pride and lust ... and that's not to mention those aspects of life covered by the Ten Commandments and Jesus' injunction to love one another. When we are yoked with Jesus and walking in step with Him our burdens are released.

If we give Him our burdens and take up His yoke, how is it we find that the burden is light? And yes, there is a burden, there is work to be done. But the burden, the work the Lord gives us is light because He has perfectly fitted it to us, like a lovingly hand-crafted yoke made by a master craftsman. **Ephesians 2:10** tells us that **“we are God's handiwork, created in Christ Jesus to do good works, which God prepared in advance for us to do.”** We are to do good in our own situation, in our families, in our church, in our community, in our workplaces. Not by straining and struggling but by a constant listening to the prompting of God. As the Lord said to Zerrubabel, it is **“not by might nor by power, but by My Spirit,”** that we overcome. God sustains us and gives us what we need when we trust in Him and walk daily with Him.

What then of this rest that the Lord promises? The Lord's rest is not the stopping of activity or work. Tiredness itself has been called a pandemic in our age. Research indicates that most people do not get sufficient sleep during their working week. Unlike many things sleep cannot be stored, you need it daily. But this is not what is being talked about here. We need to learn to physically take care of our bodies ... but that's another sermon in itself. What is being talked about here is an even deeper resting in God. In the Book of Hebrews eternal rest is talked about. This is the eternal rest in God's presence. We know there is work to do in heaven as well so the nature of rest being spoken about is clearly different from it's usual sense.

A little side-line here. There is a subtlety in Hebrew and Greek around the terms for “work” that is useful to understand. In Genesis, Adam and Eve had work to do – initially Adam had to name the animals and all the living creatures, and later Adam and Eve tended and cared for the garden together (Gen 2:15). This work was a joy and pleasant. In Isaiah 65:21-23 the prophet describes life and work in the New Jerusalem, when Jesus, returns stating that there will be the building of houses (v21), farming (v21), and work which is no longer in vain (v23). This work will be a pleasure. However, in Genesis 4:17 when Adam is punished for his

disobedience the word for work is translated in English as “toil”. Similarly, in the Greek of the New Testament there is a distinction between pleasurable work and *kopos* the word used when there is a negative toiling aspect to the labour. When Revelation 13:14 speaks of resting from labour it is this word *kopos* which is used – a rest from painful toil. Rather, in God’s Kingdom we will never get tired or weary in our work.

So, God wants us to work and keep working but with a work that is rewarding and joyful, a pleasure to be involved in. What do we need rest from? Non-productive, soul destroying, frustrating, unappreciated effort that pulls us and others down rather than building us and others up. From work that is of little eternal value and frequently only minimal value on earth. In that time work will be a joy. But this is not just a promise for the future ... it is a possibility now!

Jesus promises rest for our souls. We live in this odd time of the in-between. Sin is a defeated enemy but not yet done away with until Jesus returns. On one hand, in our walk, our souls get weary battling with the frailties of our own nature and character, our lack of fruit and gifting, our dreams and the realities of life. We saw that in the apostle Paul’s frustrations. Yet on the other hand Jesus offers us His rest, His place of quiet, of gentle reflection and calmly walking through the challenges of life secure in our faith. Not distant or immune from the world but rather highly engaged with it ... just looking through Jesus glasses as it were, resting in His love, forgiveness and grace. In Jesus, if we trust Him in everything, giving our burdens to Him, we find incredible peace and strength because He refreshes us by His Spirit.

The peace God gives, as Philippians 4:7 states, “**passes all understanding and shall keep your hearts and minds through Christ Jesus**”. Many times in my Christian walk and in life generally I have gone into situations where peace may have seemed to be the last thing on my mind or likely. Yet, whenever I have turned to the Lord in prayer He has always answered, always brought a calm strength that has been such a blessing. It is a good self-discipline to pray regularly about the situations of life, as Paul says, to pray without ceasing, and when we do God guides us and gives us His strength.

How do we make this our life’s pattern? It starts when we quietly seek and wait on the Lord in our quiet times. When we pray and allow Him to speak into our hearts. When we confess our short-comings, our busyness, our pre-occupations, our sin and ask for His forgiveness. When we lay all of our burdens at His feet and ask His help. There is nothing that God cannot handle, nothing in all of eternity that can surprise Him. All we have to do is ask. It’s like our problems are a big bully in the classroom that are forcing you into a corner and wearing you down, until you call out to your dad and he arrives. The problem is dealt with and you are given tools to handle such situations better in the future. God’s desire is for us to live in freedom, freedom from fear and oppression, freedom from pointless labour, freedom to work and worship with true joy.

In Psalm 40 David writes: **I waited patiently for the Lord; and He inclined unto me and heard my cry. He brought me up also out of a horrible pit, out of the miry clay, and set my feet upon a rock, and established my goings. And He hath put a new song in my mouth, even praise unto our God: many shall see it, and fear, and shall trust in the Lord. Blessed is that person that makes the Lord his trust, and respects not the proud, nor such as turn aside to lies.**

Let God put a new song in your heart. Let Him take your burdens, cast your cares upon Him. Enter the rest of God where activity, even work is a joy and the deep, deep peace of God imbues your soul. There you will find great joy, confidence and strength in the toughest of times. Take up the Lord’s yoke and light burden, learn from His humility and strength.

Amen