

Fourth Sunday after Trinity

Sunday, 5th July 2020

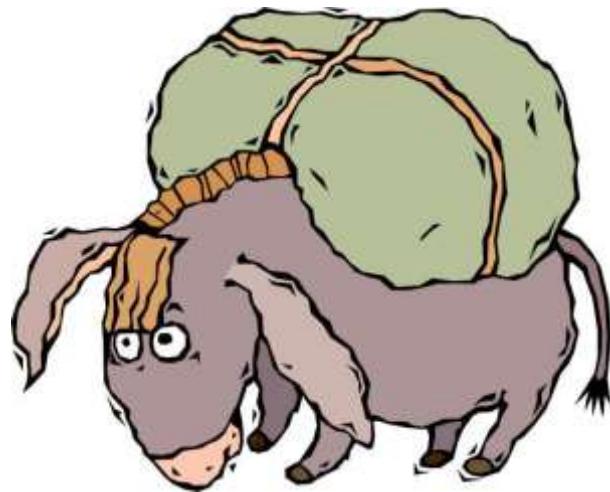


Dear Friends,

'Come to me, all you who are weary and burdened, and I will give you rest.'

(Matthew 11:28)

Do you ever have days when you feel like you are chasing your tail in ever decreasing circles? Days where nothing seems to go right and when phrases such as '*I can't see the wood for the trees!*' or '*I can't do right for doing wrong!*' ring true? These may be times in our lives when, no matter how hard we try to work for good, obstacles seem to be put in our way which leave us feeling burdened and overwhelmed, angry maybe, or which leave us exhausted or defeated by the task in hand. Often, these sorts of situations don't come alone. Phrases like '*It never rains but it pours!*' are expressive of those times in our lives when calamity and misfortune seem to crowd around us or those we love - as if we are magnets to them.



I'm feeling a bit like that for a number of reasons – holding the sick and dying on my heart whilst wrestling with some maddening Coronavirus regulations! Happily, this past week, the UK Government has further relaxed the rules prohibiting public gatherings. From this weekend, places of worship may now welcome people to gather for services, so long as some complex social distancing regulations are observed. Alleluia! The sound of rejoicing has been palpable all across the Church of England, as we have seen a gleaming light shining at the end of a long period during which the doors of many of our beautiful churches have been so painfully closed.

These regulations, issued by the Church of England mid-week, need careful digestion before we can resume services. In some of our parishes, because key volunteers are needing to remain shielded or are caring for others in their households who remain in isolation, our decisions on opening for prayer and services need to be made in the context of realistic boundaries. We could see this as a frustrating impingement on our right as Christians to gather and praise God, yet, when we look at the situation in the Cities of Leicester and Bradford, we see that Coronavirus still remains a very present threat, and so we must place our trust in the Lord and remain patient and vigilant to its impact. Our services will resume when it is safe to do so and not before. Please continue to watch our Benefice website! Hopefully by Sunday, 12th July some of us will be able to worship together, mindful that our heavenly Father has been with us throughout all these times of trial and tribulation, closer than we could ever imagine. Our love and prayers are with each of you who remain in self-isolation. You are not alone. Our Gospel message today confirms this: '*Come to me, all you who are weary and burdened, and I will give you rest.*'



***'Never Alone'* by Sharon Cummings**

Over the past months, our faithful Benefice prayer chain and Prayer Groups have been busy: active in prayer and praise - lifting the sick and needy in body, mind and spirit before the Lord - for the healing touch of His grace to bring an end to the suffering of those we love. In many cases, the outcome of our prayers and supplications have resulted in some blessed examples of healing. In other circumstances, our prayers have not been answered in the way we would have wanted, and those we love have died. These are times when our expectations and desires for what we want to see happen are out of alignment with what God knows is best for us and those we love and hold before Him.

These are times when we must grapple with the mystery and preciousness of every second of our lives, lifting ourselves up in humility as we glimpse our inability to cope with the weight of our burdens except through the gift of His love. '*Come to me, all you who are weary and burdened, and I will give you rest.*' When Jesus shares these words with us, He isn't simply saying that if we share our burdens with him He will somehow magic them all away and resolve them for us! What Jesus means is that He is offering to help us carry the burdens we face, wanting to be an active part of what we are experiencing; giving us respite from carrying our troubles and afflictions alone. With Jesus, whatever our burden, we are complete. Without Him all hope is lost.



***'My Yoke is Easy'* by Maria Lang**

This Thursday, 2nd July, would have been the 30th birthday of our eldest son. Unfortunately, the impact of Coronavirus has curtailed the weekend of fun events of thanksgiving for his life our family had planned to share with our community, raising funds for both Great Ormond Street Hospital and Karis Kids charities. But maybe we will get to do that next year!

Sadly, our firstborn child died in Great Ormond Street Hospital from a rare form of kidney disease before his first birthday. I know that if my maternal prayers of love alone could have kept him alive, he would be with us now – flourishing and as strong as our three younger, equally beautiful children have thankfully been blessed to become. Yet it was not to be. Each hour, as I watched his little body grow weaker, my head told me '*This is ok, we can cope with this.*' As his brain function dwindled to scary odds, I found myself saying '*It's fine. We will make this work.*' But in the small hours of the night before the consultants met with us to discuss his prognosis, my prayers helped me to find an epiphany. I was able to see that my desire for our, then only child, to live was selfish. I had wanted him to live at any cost ... but in that dark night of my soul, I was able to understand that he couldn't continue on life-support indefinitely, and that to ask this of him for my sake was unfair.



***'A Light to the Gentiles'* by Greg Olsen**

As he died in my arms the next afternoon, with the summer sun streaming onto us both through a hospital window, I felt a deep peace as my heart accepted the reality of the situation. His dignity in life and in death has shown me the way. Before this experience, I had let God 'go' in a blurred vision of my own sense of self-reliance and invincibility.

Through the gift of God's grace, I can look back and see that our son's birth and his death were defining moments for me, both as a mother and as a child of God. In the liminal moment of his death, as time stood still, I knew two things. First that he had gone straight into the arms of Christ, and second, that those same arms were around us all: me, my husband, our parents and family, but most of all around our son, who had lived the life he was blessed to live to the full. On his gravestone is inscribed '*His precious life brought so much love.*' Indeed it did, and continues to do so. I have learned how Jesus was, and is, with us both; helping to carry the burden but also teaching me continually that He is at the centre of every breath, thought and action of my life.

'Come to me, all you who are weary and burdened, and I will give you rest.' When Matthew recorded Jesus' words, He was gently calling us all into the way of love. For when we truly understand this message, it is not the superficial experiences of our lives which are called into question, but rather the inner motivation of our spiritual truth which draws us along Jesus' relational path of light and life.



'Even in the darkness of our sufferings, Jesus is close to us'
by Elizabeth Wang

Choosing to be in relationship with Jesus, following Him and trusting in the supreme power of His eternal love for each of us does not mean that we will never feel the depths of loss or pain, but that we will be able to withstand the experience of our unique burdens in life, knowing that we are each in the safe and loving arms of Jesus, who came to share His truth, grace and peace with us.

Alan Disher, a Licensed Lay Minister and member of our Ministry Team has kindly offered us a reflection on '*The Yoke of Christ*', which I pray will give you a blessed perspective of Jesus at work in each of our lives.

This Sunday marks the last in a series of Generous June Café Church videos put together beautifully for us by Carol Coleman. Thank you, Carol for your commitment to this. In this final week, Generous June focusses on the parable of the Widow's Mite in Luke's Gospel (Luke 21: 1-4) and Paul's exploration of the Trinitarian nature of God's generosity to the people of Rome: '*God's love has been poured into our hearts through the Holy Spirit who has been given to us.*' (Romans 5:5) With all this loving care, as Christians, how can we do less than serve God completely?

Yours, held together by Christ,

Jax
Rector, The Downs Benefice

A Reflection on the Yoke of Christ – Dr Alan Disher, LLM



'Christ the Redeemer' by Titian

The end of our reading, very familiar to most of us, I guess, is heart-warming and reassuring. But when you look at it more deeply in the context of what is going on, Jesus seems to choose a strange metaphor to describe his relationship with his would-be disciples when he speaks of his yoke! Throughout the Old Testament, a yoke was a symbol of slavery, oppression and cruelty. The Exodus was seen as God lifting the yoke of slavery that the Egyptians had laid upon the Children of Israel. Many years later, after the glory, prosperity and freedom of David's reign, Solomon gradually shed his wisdom and became a tyrant, laying what is described as a heavy yoke upon all the people, laying the foundations for the tragic splitting of God's people into two kingdoms.

Then about 500 years later, came the worst yoke of all - the 70 years of exile of the population of Jerusalem to Babylon, together with the total destruction of the City of Jerusalem and its beautiful Temple. In these appalling times, the yoke was a symbol of oppression, hardship, cruelty and suffering; a misuse of power and rampant injustice.

In New Testament times, a kind of oppression still existed, but not from the Roman authorities. Tragically, it was a burden imposed by the Jewish religious hierarchy who were using a different kind of yoke to inflict on their own people – for they 'lay heavy burdens' on them, a veritable multitude of petty rules and regulations that the Scribes and Pharisees had added to the Law.

In contrast, Jesus, approachable and gentle, was bringing to those gathered round him, the very heart and mind of his Father, a message in stark contrast to that of the so-called experts. Jesus had not come to destroy any part of the God-given law, but he summarises the whole thrust and challenge of the law by quoting from Leviticus 19: 18 – the summary we use in our Communion Service – *'love those around you with your all, as well as loving God with all your heart, soul and strength and mind.'* And, unlike the Scribes and Pharisees, Jesus offers kindness and relief. *'Come to me, all you who are weary and burdened, and I will give you rest.'*



'Burden' by Nick Youngson

But why does he then follow this comfort by offering another yoke? It is surely still a symbol of slavery, working for a master, an owner, even if that owner is Jesus. Perhaps the explanation lies in a closer look at what his disciples called him – teacher, yes, but also Lord and Master. Master implies ownership, and Paul sharply reminds the Corinthian Church of this: *'Do you not know that your bodies are temples of the Holy Spirit, who is in you, whom you have received from God? You are not your own; you were bought at a price. Therefore honour God with your bodies.'* (1 Cor 6: 19-20).

I remember one of the old choruses we used to sing years ago had the words:

'Now I belong to Jesus' (which is perfectly true).

'Jesus belongs to me.' (which is *not* true, because we don't own him. He is our Lord and redeemed us, but paid a very high ransom by dying for us on the cross).



We need to remember what is implied when we accept the yoke which Jesus offers. *His yoke* is not a yoke of oppression. A farmer uses the yoke to guide his ox to help cultivate the land which will lead to the production of food - for the ox as well as the farmer and those he supplies. The yoke is a symbol of ownership, of belonging and being valued and cared for. Jesus has acted as a servant but is always the Master. He is Saviour, but also, (and always) the Lord. He was the once for all Sacrifice for sin, but always the eternal High Priest. He is the friend of sinners, but always the King.

We must always carry his yoke, but with pride, joy and gratitude.

'We come to him, our Priest and Apostle, clothed in his glory and bearing his name. Laying our lives with gladness before him, filled with his spirit, we worship the King.'

(from the hymn 'Jesus is King' by Wendy Churchill)

Yours in the yoke of Christ,

Alan

Dr Alan Disher, LLM

Collect Prayer for the Fourth Sunday after Trinity

O God, the protector of all who trust in you, without whom nothing is strong, nothing is holy: increase and multiply upon us your mercy; that with you as our ruler and guide we may so pass through things temporal that we lose not our hold on things eternal; grant this, heavenly Father, for our Lord Jesus Christ's sake, who is alive and reigns with you, in the unity of the Holy Spirit, one God, now and for ever. Amen.



'Transfiguration' by Alexander Andreyevich Ivanov

Matthew 11: 16-19 and 25-end.

Jesus said to the crowds: 'To what can I compare this generation? They are like children sitting in the marketplaces and calling out to others:

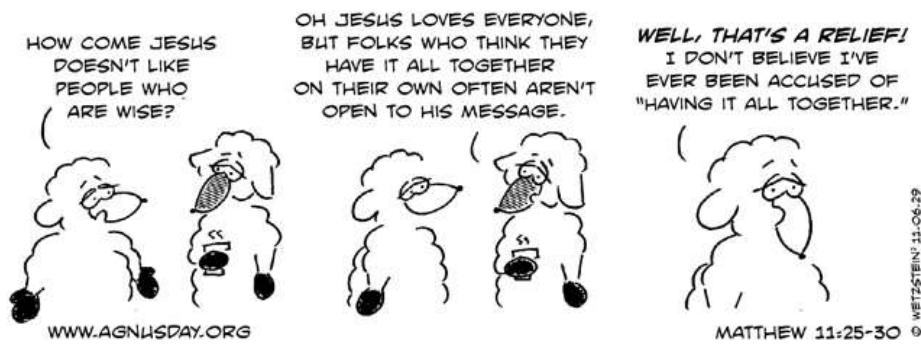
"We played the pipe for you,
and you did not dance;
we sang a dirge,
and you did not mourn."

For John came neither eating nor drinking, and they say, "He has a demon." The Son of Man came eating and drinking, and they say, "Here is a glutton and a drunkard, a friend of tax collectors and sinners." But wisdom is proved right by her deeds.'

Rest for the Weary

At that time Jesus said, 'I praise you, Father, Lord of heaven and earth, because you have hidden these things from the wise and learned, and revealed them to little children. Yes, Father, for this is what you were pleased to do. All things have been committed to me by my Father. No one knows the Son except the Father, and no one knows the Father except the Son and those to whom the Son chooses to reveal him.

Come to me, all you who are weary and burdened, 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.'



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