

## THE YOKE OF CHRIST

JULY 6, 2008

Today we have as our appointed reading one of the great passages of Gospel wisdom. This we read from the eleventh chapter of the Gospel of St. Matthew, verses 28 to 30:

“Come to me, all who labour and are heavy-laden, and I will give you rest. 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.”

This passage and the three verses before it were once described by the writer M. J. Lagrange as Matthew’s Pearl of Great Price. It was a very important moment in the ministry of Jesus which led to this climactic utterance, sublime in meaning and poignant in love and hope.

The previous verses have Jesus declaring: “I thank you, Father, Lord of heaven and earth, that you have hidden these things from the wise and understanding and revealed them to babes”. Jesus had been long enough in his ministry by this point to note how people with education and often theological training, people with positions and deemed to be wise, found it difficult to accept his words. They also could not swallow that this humble man, at least humble in their eyes, could be the long awaited Messiah.

He noted it is usually the common folk who are truly searching for the right path to follow, who end up believing in Christ and his message. Jesus marvels at the need of so many to make faith complicated and exclusive. So many people of faith were determined that the message and blessing of God were for the few so called faithful. However, the teachings of Jesus were for all, not only those who already had so much and had been blessed with the teachings all their life.

We live in an age of information and often information overload. As a result many simple things have become complicated, more so than probably is necessary. Have you purchased a cell phone lately? If so, have you worked your way easily through the instructions for usage? I have a new cell phone as my old one was too large and my contract was up. It had been reasonably easy to learn how to use as it had few functions, the few that I needed of calling, receiving and retrieving messages. My new one is slim, good to look at and easy to fit in any pocket or purse. However, it is also a camera, a video camera, a music player, a text messenger, a call centre and many other usages. So, I read the instructions, understood very little and failed to activate my message centre. So I did what any respectable person would do, I had my daughter show me and set it up for me. It still is far more complicated and has many more usages than I need or want but now at least I can find the kernel of services I need.

Jesus must have felt the same way when he sat and discussed faith with many of the religious leaders who were fanatical in their following of every letter of the law. Do you think God has made faith so difficult, he would have asked? Would God make faith only available to those with education and the time to spend on these practices, noble though

they may be in intent and devotion? Do you really believe that God is for the exclusive and faithful few?

These leaders were not happy with Jesus. He appeared to them to dilute the faith and make it too easy. Surely, a true believer had to work hard every day to please God and in time to become acceptable to him.

Jesus went on to say these words: “All things have been delivered to me by my Father; and no one knows the Son except the Father, and no one knows the Father except the Son and any to whom the Son chooses to reveal him.”

These words enraged the religious leaders of Jesus’ day. Jesus was staking his claim to being the Messiah and to being the interpreter of God’s will. Jesus appeared to be saying to these leaders: I do know what God intends and I do understand his intentions for all people. Listen to what I say and believe. Faith should be joyous and freely offered to God just as God has freely offered his love and his spirit to all men and women.

Jesus, as he spoke to the searching crowd, uttered many wonderful words about the experience of faith in following him. He spoke of belief as taking on a yoke. Everyone in his day would understand yokes – those devices for cattle enabling them to pull extraordinary loads or for people who placed yokes on their shoulders in order to carry heavy pails of water, earth or stones.

However, after offering his yoke, Jesus said these words: “Come to me, all who labour and are heavy-laden, and I will give you rest.” People welcomed this invitation as most were exhausted by the burdens of daily life which for the most part was a tough grind of never ending demands and worries.

Jesus spoke of a rest from all of these burdens. Not that the burdens would all disappear, but that faith in a loving God will put these pressures in perspective and help us to glimpse the wider picture and discover we are not alone. Rest was the word Jesus spoke, blessed rest which people experienced very little in their life.

Then he invited them to take his yoke upon them and learn from him. Who needed another yoke I am sure some people muttered? That is the last thing we need! Then Jesus states his yoke is easy, and his burden is light. He also said: “learn from me; for I am gentle and lowly in heart, and you will find rest for your souls.”

Jesus was a genius at illustration and had a powerful ability to say much in few words, words which could be remembered by illiterate people. Unlike the religious leaders of his day, Jesus did not place on people impossible rituals and dietary laws which they could not keep.

His invitation to the people then and to us now is a wonderful invitation to come to him and not be anxious, to come before God with expectation of acceptance and peace. My yoke is easy and with it you will find rest for your soul. His yoke was the yoke of faith.

For though faith is implanted in all of us by God in creation, and though God tries to get us to acknowledge it, faith is also our act: "This I do believe, and thus will I live." It is the yoke of conscience: we strive to do what is right in his sight. It is the yoke of love, a yoke of personal allegiance to Christ. Pride and selfishness go contrary to our deepest nature, and therefore tears us apart. The outcome of accepting Christ's yoke is refreshment which is true peace.

Jesus was very conscious that men and women were much more than flesh and blood. He was not careless enough to promise that their physical life would be easier if they followed God. Quite the contrary, he knew that following him would not be socially acceptable then or whenever. Rather, he spoke of that which made men and women different from all other creation. He was speaking about their very spirit, their soul, that which made them unique in the world and before God.

Remember again the words of Jesus: "Come and I will give your soul rest." This was and is the promise of Jesus to each of us. What did Jesus mean by this promised rest for the soul? I believe it relates right back to our sense of who we are and our sense of our self-worth.

The people who surrounded Jesus had a hard life, most lived a day to day existence. Many were despised by others and looked down upon as people of no significance at all. Jesus was able to light a spark in their hearts for he reminded them if they had heard before or told them for the first time that each of them was a child of God. They were God's children because God had created them in love and loved them even when they were astray or ignorant of God's existence.

Jesus preached the value of each person, a value given them by their very birth. This position of God's child had nothing to do with who your parents were, your social position, your race, your gender or your colour. You had value by your very existence. Therefore, by recognizing God's part in your life and his ongoing love for you, you acknowledge God's love. Take my yoke upon you for my yoke unlike the yokes of this world is light and will lead to rest for your soul.

People in authority in the faith communities and in the political realm scoffed at the words of Jesus. Do you really expect us to believe that this riff raff, these people who are illiterate and often unwashed, these people who do not follow all the rituals are our equal? Give us a break! What utter nonsense!

Jesus knew that the sense of self importance and entitlement of many of the elite cut them off from experiencing a close and loving relationship with God. What kind of a God would be that open and accepting? There was no way God would consider all people equal before him, was the common belief.

Jesus looked with pity on many who worked so hard at their religion and yet missed sensing the closeness and forgiveness of God. It was why he knew instinctively that those in the crowd would be more accepting. They were well aware of their faults;

they understood evil between people; they knew the experience of exclusion and knew what it meant to be looked down upon by others.

Jesus then as today stretches out his arms and heart to all men and women wherever they may be and whatever circumstances in life they experience. Come unto me, all you who labour, and I will give you rest. Do not be burdened with a sense of non-value for you were created by a loving Creator; you have been loved since you arrived by a gracious God; you are being called to rest and peace when you acknowledge the love and forgiveness of God which has been offered to you since your birth.

You can readily see why Lagrange called this passage “Matthew’s Pearl of Great Price.” For in these short verses we witness the essence of Christ’s teaching. In this passage, we glimpse the deep root of true joy, namely that we become one with our God.

This joy also instills tranquility. The fact that the wise and mighty did not receive Jesus has its own root cause which was and is man and woman’s pride and the abuse of human freedom. The passage we read speaks of the truth being revealed to babes. The majority of people instinctively know that the only way to come to God freely with joy is if heaven itself assures us that this is possible. This is the wonder of Jesus and his ministry for he came from God to assure us of the validity of the invitation to come and worship God with all our hearts and all our souls and yes, even with all our minds.

Come unto me all you who labour and I will give you rest. We note with wonder that Christ has set no limits around that word **all**. The sad of heart are included, and all who bend beneath time’s load. It is a staggering claim made by Jesus. These words may outrage every sensibility but in Jesus Christ that which was deemed impossible was and is made clear.

The word Jesus offers is rest. The word can also be translated as “refreshment,” for with each turning toward Christ, the weary find cheer of soul. This refreshment is not idleness, not slackness of either hands or spirit, not exemption from toil, but rather the deep calming of the heart of men and women.

“No one knows the father except the Son.” Jesus, the Son, has peace and bestows it. His invitation is the blessed salvation for you and for me. Thanks be to God for his goodness and his never ending love. Amen

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