

Religion and rest

It is surely one of the most comforting and appealing verses in the New Testament, one that has doubtless brought strength to many troubled souls. ‘Come to me, all you that are weary and are carrying heavy burdens, and I will give you rest. Take my yoke upon you, and learn from me; and you will find rest for your souls. For my yoke is easy, and my burden is light...’

So what prompted Jesus to say this? What inspired these sublime words of comfort and reassurance? Well, if we put these words into the context of Matthew chapter 11, we find that not all is well with Jesus’ mission and ministry. It seems that his message is not meeting with a good response from all quarters. In the opening verses of the passage we learn that Jesus’ fore-runner, John the Baptist, has been imprisoned for his preaching and that prompts Jesus to point out that there is no pleasing some people. John, after all, had been an ascetic living out in the wilderness on a sparse diet. He had proclaimed a fiery message of judgement, and he’d met with violence and imprisonment. And now Jesus had come with a very different ministry, being seen at the dinner tables of the sinners and the undesirables, and he was being dismissed as a drunkard and a party-animal. How could he win? And then, in verses we did not read, Jesus condemns certain cities where he had worked miracles and wonders but which had prompted no response or repentance. Jesus, however, is not surprised at this rejection. After all, he says, true faith and understanding are gifts from God. Humans are confused and ill-fitted to God’s truth. In fact only he, Jesus, as God’s Son, truly understands God at all, along with those to whom he chooses to reveal God. And, furthermore, those to whom revelation and understanding are given are, says Jesus, not the wise and the intelligent but the infants - or ‘the simple’ as other translations put it. In other words it is the unsophisticated, the unlearned, the unwise who are privileged in God’s new realm. These are the ones at the bottom of the pile, often labouring under political and personal loads, having been dealt a loser’s hand in the game of life. They are also the ones for whom religion, far from being liberating as it should be, is oppressive and heavy, and who end up struggling under the yoke of God’s Law. And to them, Jesus says, ‘come to me, you weary, you heavy laden and take my yoke upon you, for it is easy and brings rest to your tired, worn-out souls’.

Now, when we put these words in that context we note that Jesus here is mining a rich seam in God's Word that might give some of us who are gathered here this morning some cause for concern. We might put it this way – it seems clear that those who are most comfortable and at home in the world are least fitted for the Kingdom Jesus proclaimed. Those who are top of the class in the world find themselves staying behind for remedial lessons in God's new realm while those at the bottom celebrate. And this is something we hear elsewhere in the New Testament. Listen again to some words of Paul which are addressed to a revolutionary church community in Corinth where slave and free had sat side by side and where human pecking orders and hierarchies were being overthrown - but which was in danger of being undone by high profile achievers with wealth and status and learning. Paul writes, 'Few of you are wise by any human standard, few powerful or of noble birth. Yet, to shame the wise, God has chosen what the world counts folly, and to shame what is strong, God has chosen what the world counts as weakness. He has chosen things without rank or standing in the world, mere nothings, to overthrow the existing order.' Now, there is Paul's version of Jesus' 'I thank you, Father... because you have hidden these things from the wise and intelligent, and have revealed them to infants.'

And it seems that this does indeed reflect early Christianity. It is fascinating, for example, that a Greek opponent of Christianity by the name of Celsus, writing in the second century, could describe Christianity as a religion of women, children and slaves. That, evidently, was the reputation of the Christian church. Indeed this becomes a bit of a bee in Celsus' bonnet – it seems to have really bugged him that the church was so largely comprised of what he considered to be losers. So he accuses the church of having a rule, that, '... no one comes to us who has been instructed, or who is wise or prudent (for such qualifications are deemed evil by us); but if there be any ignorant, or unintelligent, or uninstructed, or foolish persons, let them come with confidence'. And Celsus complains that Christians can only attract 'the silly, and the mean, and the stupid, with women and children'. Now Celsus is probably guilty of some exaggeration and distortion, but it certainly seems undeniable that the lower classes were well represented in Christian congregations and that the faith was considered increasingly repugnant the closer you got to imperial power. That's why centuries later Friedrich Engels, Karl Marx' collaborator, could write, 'Christianity was from the beginning a

religion of the oppressed – slaves and freedmen, the poor and those without rights, people who had been enslaved or dispersed by Rome.’ Indeed that is why Marx himself could describe religion as ‘the sigh of the oppressed creature.’ That was certainly true of Christianity.

So how are Jesus’s words about rest for the weary and the simple to address us today? Well, given what has been said so far, let’s begin by ruling out one way of interpreting them that might come to mind, and that is by seeing them as a panacea for busy, schedule-driven, stressed-out people who struggle with the pace of modern life. The fact is that, so obsessed are we with production and consumption in our crazy consumer world, we are ever more harassed and listless by the lives we lead and we find ourselves longing for rest. And so stress is the symbolic symptom of our age. Despite every conceivable time- and labour-saving device stress is the great enemy, and there is an entire industry devoted to those for whom the rat-race of modern life is all too much. So we turn to all sorts of remedies like yoga and mindfulness and every weird diet and natural remedy in a desperate attempt to alleviate our condition, and no doubt some of these can be very helpful. But that is not what Jesus is offering us here. His words are not an antidote for the stresses and strains of 21st century obsessive consumerism and materialism. This is to interpret Jesus’ words in terms of therapy rather than discipleship. It’s to turn faith into a means of maintaining and making tolerable the dysfunctional world we have created for ourselves - rather than overthrowing the existing order. So much of the way we live creates not a yoke for our shoulders but a rod for our backs and that is not what Jesus is offering us rest from.

So if these words of Jesus about giving rest to the weary are not a solution for the ravaged and the driven, how might they address us today? How are we to hear them and receive them aright? Well, maybe this is where Celsus’ charge that Christianity attracted women, children and slaves might help us. For what is it that women, children and slaves all had in common in those days? What linked them? Well, what they had in common was that all of them were in some sense powerless and at odds with the world they lived in. The ancient world, even more than today, was a male world, and it was an adult world and it was a power-driven world, and women and children and slaves lived life on other’s terms, leaving them powerless and diminished. But that made them all the more ready for Jesus’ world, Jesus’ realm – all the more ripe for Jesus’ Kingdom. They were ready to find in Jesus rest for their souls. And

taking our bearing from them we might therefore consider three ways in which we might possibly feel powerless and at odds with life this morning.

The first possible reason is that this morning you might be struggling and at odds with yourself. Perhaps there are things in your life that you want shot of, that you want to change, but at times it seems too much. Those verses that we heard earlier from Paul's letter to the Romans are complex and dense, but basically they describe someone who is at odds with him or herself, someone who is wrestling with his or herself. 'For I do not do what I want, but I do the very thing that I hate, says Paul... 'Wretched man that I am! Who will rescue me from the body of death?' And maybe you can relate to that. Maybe you can identify with something of that turmoil.

Or, following on from that, maybe it is faith and it's demands that you are struggling and at odds with. The Christian faith lays a difficult yoke upon us, after all. There is the yoke of forgiveness and of reconciliation with those who have wronged us and that can be hard. And you know that Christ's call to follow him lays upon us the demands and disciplines of discipleship, and sometimes it seems much easier just to be like everyone else, to go with the flow. And besides, sometimes there is the sense that God is distant or absent or silent and is not hearing us, not answering our prayers, that you're just getting God's answering machine. And so you feel that discipleship is a burden and you're out of sorts with God and the adventure of faith has lost its appeal.

At odds with yourself, at odds with God and faith, thirdly and lastly, maybe you are feeling powerless and at odds with the world. And here maybe your experience is especially close to the women and the children and the slaves. After all, at times the world can feel a very hostile and alien place and you feel its cold shoulder. You come up against the iron fist of bureaucracy and you feel diminished and dehumanised. Or it can feel like a heavy yoke when our rigidly secular world marginalises faith and squeezes it out, and the shrill voice of atheism gets louder and louder, and you feel displaced and estranged. For any number of reasons you may be feeling that the world this morning is an inhospitable place from which you feel alienated and displaced.

'Come to me' says Jesus. That yoke of the self, that yoke of faith, that yoke of the world – these can be heavy and discouraging. They can leave us feeling as if we're pulling against the grain, against the odds. Well, picture not a single yoke with you with you straining and striving alone. Picture a double yoke with Jesus alongside you, sharing the load. Let that heavy yoke be lifted

by the one to whom all things have been handed over by the Father. He is gentle and humble in heart and his promise is rest for your soul. For his yoke is easy, and his burden is light. Amen.

O holy and loving God,
God of life, God of light,
God of all wisdom and truth,
You have made us for yourself,
made us to know and to love you
even as we are known and loved by you.
You have made to walk with you,
To share our lives with you
and in union with you we find peace and rest.
We praise your holy name.
Yet, we come here this morning and
we are not at peace or at rest.
We come with restless hearts not only
because of burdens of anxiety and care that we carry,
but also because are not at peace with you,
or with others, or with ourselves.
We know how we want to live,
We know how we want to be,
and yet are in conflict for we know that we do
the very things that we hate
and that we critics in others.
And so we confess our sins to you and acknowledge our failures.

O God, you have made us for yourselves and our hearts
are restless until they find rest in you.
Breathe forgiveness over us,
set out hands to the plough once more
and walk with us as we strive to walk with you.

We pray in Jesus' name. Amen.