

Matthew 11:16-30

It is clear from today's reading from Matthew's gospel that Jesus had bad days – just like the rest of us. You know the kind of day: when your life seems to be set against the grain of the universe, when (in my case) technology is conspiring against you, or 'when the world is on your case' to quote a popular song – or maybe when you just feel the weight of the load you are carrying is too heavy or too frightening to be yours. Well, yes, it seems like Jesus had days like that too and we read of one in our passage from Matthew 11.

Apparently Jesus' ministry is not going well - people are rejecting his message for reasons that dismay him. Jesus complains that he had been preceded by John the Baptist, that wild figure who had preached a stern and austere message of repentance – and John had been rejected. And now here was he, Jesus, proclaiming a more joyful message of grace, and celebrating the new thing God was doing by partying and feasting - and that message was being rejected too. John was perceived as being so miserable that he was accused of having a demon: Jesus was so upbeat he was accused of being a glutton and a drunkard and of hanging out with the wrong crowd. There's just no pleasing some people! And it appears that Jesus had been doing some amazing things in the cities scattered round Galilee: 'deeds of power' – but there had been no response, no turning around of lives. Let's not mince words: Jesus knew all about failure. He knew that sinking feeling of putting great effort into something and watching it either get bad reviews or else get no response at all. When you are in that situation, however, maybe it is easier for your heart to go out to others who are struggling too – others who are finding that life is wearing them down. And so it is with Jesus. His wisdom – the wisdom of his preaching, the wisdom of his message about the new thing that God is doing in their midst is being rejected by the so-called wise elites who are comfortable and on top of life and who are too at ease in the world to catch on. But Jesus is reaching out to those who are on the underside, the powerless, the ones who do not feel at ease in a world that seemed to be stacked against them.

So who exactly are these people who Jesus is reaching out to? Well, maybe they are folk who are struggling economically: struggling with debts and with taxes, being ground down by the ruthless Roman imperial machine that is draining them. Or maybe they are folk who are struggling with God: people for whom God has become distant, people for whom obedience to God's Law has become a burden rather than a joy and who feel guilty or failures. Or maybe they are folk who in some other way are at a loss, feeling the world's cold shoulder and anxious and fearful about what tomorrow may bring. Well, these are the ones who will be drawn by Jesus' message, who will discern his wisdom. These are the ones he refers to as 'infants' for they are the vulnerable ones: 'I thank you, father, Lord of heaven and earth, because you have hidden these things from the wise and the intelligent and have revealed them to infants.' These are dwellers in the valley of the shadow, but they find themselves open and receptive to the light of Christ. And then there comes Jesus' tender and compassionate summons, his gracious invitation to the afflicted: '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; 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.'

Now, I want to pause here for a moment and suggest that in the gospels there are three things that are laid upon people, three things that Jesus pictures people carrying on their shoulders. The first is a cross. So in just the previous chapter of Matthew Jesus has told his followers, 'whoever does not take up the cross and follow me is not worthy of me.' The cross beam of the cross of crucifixion was carried on the shoulders of criminals to their place of execution, as Jesus did, and Jesus is warning us here that following him may get us into trouble. Following him will be seen as subversive, and so Christians may have to be prepared to be executed as enemies of the state, as has happened so often throughout history. Christians may have to be prepared to have the cross laid upon them. But then Jesus speaks of something else that he saw laid upon people, and that was the practice of God's Law. Later in Matthew's Gospel Jesus speaks out against the religious elite of his day, the scribes and the Pharisees who turned God's good Law into an

instrument of oppression: ‘They tie up heavy burdens, hard to bear, and lay them on the shoulders of others...’ These are the people for whom devotion to God had been turned into a burden, people for whom God’s beautiful law had become a tyrant. And some of the people who in our reading Jesus calls ‘weary and heavy laden’ fall into this category.

So the cross, and the practice of God’s Law were both seen by Jesus as heavy burdens laid upon people’s shoulders. But then there is this third thing. It’s pictured in our passage as a yoke, something laid upon the shoulders of an ox, and the yoke here is commitment to Jesus. The yoke here is the response to the call of Christ, the readiness to respond to Jesus’ summons to follow him. It’s the yoke of discipleship. And Jesus says that this yoke – his yoke - is easy, his burden is light.

Now, I want us to ponder this image of the yoke that Jesus is giving us here. And for the best explanation that I have heard for what Jesus is saying you have to imagine not one ox but two, as was often the case in Jesus’ times, as they are yoked together, side by side, pulling together. And you have to imagine therefore a load that is too heavy for one oxen to pull on its own: it would struggle by itself – but suddenly it is joined by this other one and then they’re yoked together, pulling together - and suddenly the burden is light.

Now this image runs through the Bible. A Christian writer, Sam Wells, makes a great deal of the word ‘with’ in the Bible, and he contrasts it with the word ‘for’. Let me explain. If you want to help somebody, you can do something *for* them – do something for them that they can’t do for themselves. And doing something *for* someone does not necessarily involve any real relationship or connection with them. I had a godfather who used to very occasionally send me a present and I only actually met him about once in my entire life. But you can also be *with* them – alongside them. And being *with* someone involves relationship, connection. And the best thing – and this is what love is all about – is when being *with* someone does something *for* them. The best thing is when being with someone strengthens, and sustains and blesses them. And the Bible again and again pictures God like this, as one who is with us as well as for us and who thus strengthens and blesses us and takes away our fear. Think of the best known Psalm of all: ‘even though I walk through the darkest valley, I fear no evil; for you are *with* me.’ This is the presence of the shepherd who is with us and sustains us in green pastures. Or take some beautiful verses from the prophet Isaiah, spoken to Israel in the fear and pain of exile in Babylon: ‘Do not fear, for I have redeemed you: I have called you by name, you are mine. When you walk through the waters, I will be *with* you...Do not fear, for I am with you.’ Or recall the message of the angel at Jesus’ birth, ‘he shall be called Emmanuel which means ‘God with us’’, God with us through thick and thin, exactly what we call ‘the Incarnation’ is all about. And this is the heart of the Gospel: God is with us and therefore on our side, but also God is with us and therefore at our side. And this is the image to hold onto in our reading: an ox pulling a load, a weight, a burden far too heavy for it to pull on its own. And it’s distressed and tired and weary. But its yoke is made for two. And suddenly the other ox, a far stronger ox is at its side, yoked with it. And suddenly the yoke is easy, the burden light.

To change the image somewhat, but keeping with the animal world: you see how sometimes large birds fly in a V formation – a whole flock in the shape of a V - and it’s reckoned that they do that because they are wise, and they know that in that formation one bird flies in the slipstream of the one ahead of it, and catches its updraft – you see it in wild geese. Well, maybe that’s an image for you to hold on today, along with that ox yoked alongside another. Perhaps with life under lockdown you’re getting weary and wondering how long this is going to last. Or perhaps its other stresses and strains that are overwhelming you and you just want release. Well, Jesus does not promise us release. But he does promise rest: a strength and a composure that lies way beyond your own resources. Your faltering, fragile, hesitant commitment to Christ is your yoke - and Jesus is beside you: pulling with you, and with him there that load will not be unbearable.

Here, of course, we come to the beauty of what we do here at this table, and at your tables in your own homes. Holy Communion is all about Emmanuel, God with us. It is about a God who is with us in broken bread – in our brokenness and fear. And it’s about a God who is with us to fortify us with wine, new wine. So come, and receive the rest, the peace that passes all understanding. Amen.