

Matthew 11:28-30

When times are challenging and uncertain it is natural for humans to grasp and hang on to things that are familiar, even if we don't fully appreciate the extent of their meaning. I guess that it's not very surprising that on reading today's Gospel passage that the words that leapt off the page are words of loving invitation spoken by our Lord to the people, as he was teaching in Galilee. Familiar and comforting words, yet also words of huge challenge that speak of turning our usual understanding of 'the norm' on its head, and embracing a different understanding and new practice. This is surely something we are all being expected to adapt to in current times.

28 'Come to me, all you that are weary and are carrying heavy burdens, and I will give you rest. 29 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. 30 For my yoke is easy, and my burden is light.'

The idea of 'yoke' and 'burden' is not particularly positive! When we think of being yoked we think of freedom being removed, of being kept under control, of our desires to do as we wish being curtailed. We think of being bound by someone else's code, even of being controlled! Burden conjures up for us something that is heavy, unwieldy, something that makes life difficult. We might think of beasts of burden - animals crumbling under impossible loads they are expected to carry. Burden brings to mind something that is likely to break us physically, mentally and emotionally. Many might see the challenges of Coronavirus in such terms. It has taken away our freedoms, our free will and choice. It has shackled us to a way of behaving that has demanded great resilience for survival, and for many the burden of this has been incredibly difficult to bear. That, of course, is for those who have not fallen ill with the virus. For those suffering and those treating the burden is on a much greater level!

So, given that our experience of yoke and burden can justifiably be so challenging, how can being a follower of Christ change this? In the midst of our experiences how can Jesus' way make a difference? His words turn our experience upside down, but the reality is that our experience has actually turned God's original intentions the wrong way up. We were created to be in harness with God. To live our lives yoked to our creator, not to restrict our freedoms but to ensure we never had to bear the burdens alone. We were created to follow God's lead, to trust to his direction and to allow him to help us through the challenges that life would bring. We were not created to carry these things alone, apart from our creator. It was human choice that prevented God from sharing the load. God had provided for us a beautiful and wonderful place to live, with an occupation, that was not too strenuous but very fulfilling. Then, in disobedience, a bad choice was made, and so began a way of life that was hard and strenuous. What became human 'normal' was actually in direct contrast to what God had intended for us.

So let us look again at those few verses. 28 'Come to me, all you that are weary and are carrying heavy burdens, and I will give you rest. 29 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. 30 For my yoke is easy, and my burden is light.'

They begin with an invitation. An inviting to everyone who hears the words. An invitation without condition. Come. Although there is no condition, the invitation does ask something of the receiver. We have to make the movement towards our host. We have to receive that invitation and act upon it. It is our choice, but the reward is great. We are promised rest. Rest in the midst of our weariness. Then the gentle invitation to live as God intended. In harness with him, allowing him to ease our

lives and to guide our path. Allowing him to bear the weight of all that is unbearable. We are being enticed once again into a deeper loving relationship. God is showing us his nature, gentleness and humility, and is wanting to nurture us within that. We are not shackling ourselves to a tyrant but choosing to harness ourselves in relationship to a loving father. God wants us to embrace relationship with him, and when we choose to allow him to be in control of our lives the weight and weariness of always trying to 'go it alone' is lifted! It doesn't mean that life's challenges disappear, but we are able to rest in the promise that God is there and that He is in control.