

Jesus says: '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.'

Such promise is contained in these verses. Who among us hasn't wanted to find rest from all the weariness we carry; from the pains and strife of this world; from the effects of isolation in recent months? Who doesn't want an easier life? There have been many times during lockdown when I have wanted things to be just that little bit easier – a few less balls to juggle; being able to worship together; or simply a return to what I now regard as the lush pastures of the past when it seemed like anything and everything was possible! The promise is mesmerising, but there's a catch. If we want this freedom we first need to surrender our freedom and link ourselves to Christ. It's not simply a question of walking alongside him but physically binding ourselves to him so that he may direct us, lead us, encourage us.

One of the special items of clothing a priest wears is a stole. This scarf-like band of material is placed around our necks and symbolises that at our ordination we responded to Christ's call on our lives to fulfil a particular ministry among his people. We chose to submit ourselves to Christ's just and gentle rule and to try to live-out the values of his Kingdom, calling others to share in the good news as we go. I can still recall the moment, 14 years ago, when my stole was placed over my shoulders by my then vicar as my priestly ministry began. The stole represents the yoke – a beam of wood placed over a cow's or horse's shoulders to which machinery or other heavy objects may be attached – by which Christ directs us, steers us, and even makes us do things we otherwise wouldn't! We are told that it is easy and light... and at times it is. It fits well and the load is not too great. But at other times it pinches or presses down and can really feel like a 20 tonne lorry has been strapped to our backs and we are being asked to pull it up a hill! There have certainly been times when I have questioned whether Jesus was telling the truth as it hasn't always felt like it. But then, miraculously, things start to improve and the load lightens. And then, when I look back, I realise something. I wasn't just yoked to Christ but I was yoked to all manner of things all trying to pull me in differing directions.

And so I wonder, if we want this freedom, this easy burden, this rest, what yokes currently bind us and make our lives more complicated than they ought? To what or whom are we yoked? To what or whom do we give ourselves? What or who takes priority in our lives, orienting how we live and relate to others, how we make decisions? We all harness our lives to something: another person, work, family, success, reputation. And sometimes our yokes are more inward like fear, anxiety, anger, particular beliefs and opinions, the losses and tragedies of our lives. Regardless, they are the relationships and attachments that we depend on for meaning and, for better or worse, they give us our life's direction. Think for a moment about what yokes you wear?

In many of the conversations I have had with folk during lockdown I have heard the palpable relief at not having to do certain things; being able to stop and take a moment to recalibrate and work out that which is important. Today, once more, we are being invited stop, to take a moment and work out that which is important. To determine what is the most important thing in our lives. To align ourselves with Christ and submit wholeheartedly to his yoke – not just placing it on when it is convenient but strapping it on securely.

But if we did this, what would it mean for us? Well... it means we take seriously our life of discipleship. Our prayer becomes more about intimacy with God and knowing God than about getting what we want. We work for justice and the dignity of every human being. We care for the poor, feed the hungry, and defend the oppressed. We love our enemies. We offer forgiveness before it is asked for. Our faithfulness should be evident by how we live and speak. We live each day praising God and giving thanks for his gifts and blessings. We let go of anger. We don't live in fear and we trust that daily bread will be provided.

But, when we are yoked to anything or anyone other than Christ, we are often left weary and burdened. This is a spiritual condition, a disease of the soul, as much or maybe even more than it is a physical one. Our lives are frenzied and fragmented. We end up comparing, competing, and judging ourselves and each other. We act as one person in one situation and another person in a different situation. There is no internal integrity. The reserves run dry and we live exhausted with nothing of depth or substance to offer. Soon relationships become superficial and utilitarian.

Are we weary? Burdened? If so, maybe this means we are not fully wearing the yoke of Christ. Too often we treat our weariness and medicate our burdens with addictions, a new toy, a holiday, an afternoon nap, a day off, busyness and perfectionism. Inward voids cannot be filled by exterior things. More often than not we are just as weary and just as burdened, afterwards, as we were before. These are not the antidote to our exhaustion. The antidote to our exhaustion begins with wholeheartedness. That wholeheartedness is only found in sharing the yoke of Christ, the heart of God and the heart of humanity beating as one.

Quite often at bedtime, my children are so tired, so exhausted they really misbehave. They can barely keep their eyes open and yet they refuse to lay down and rest? You also know, I'm sure, that it's not just my children or children who are like this. It happens at every age and in every generation. Jesus is like a loving parent looking at his children, saying: "You are like exhausted children, so tired you do not know which end is up, so weary and burdened you misbehave. It doesn't have to be like this. Take my yoke upon you."

To take on the yoke of Jesus is to take on his life. "Take my yoke upon you, and learn from me," he says. "Let your heart love like mine. Let your mind be filled with the same concerns as mine. Let your feet walk in step with mine. Let your hands touch the world like mine. Let your eyes see the Father like mine. Live and move in tandem with me, as one, and you will find rest for your soul."

Today, we are invited to look afresh at our lives and determine that which is important and that which is not; to choose a path that is different to that which the world offers. But how will you choose?