

Proper 9A 2017 sermon

Matthew 11:16-19, 25-30

Jesus said to the crowd, "To what will I compare this generation? It is like children sitting in the marketplaces and calling to one another, 'We played the flute for you, and you did not dance; we wailed, and you did not mourn.'

For John came neither eating nor drinking, and they say, 'He has a demon'; the Son of Man came eating and drinking, and they say, 'Look, a glutton and a drunkard, a friend of tax collectors and sinners!' Yet wisdom is vindicated by her deeds."

At that time Jesus said, "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; yes, Father, for such was your gracious will. All things have been handed over to me by my Father; and no one knows the Son except the Father, and no one knows the Father except the Son and anyone to whom the Son chooses to reveal him.

"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."

"Come unto me, all ye that travail and are heavy-laden, and I will refresh you."

It is one of the more familiar Scripture verses for Anglicans, for it appeared in the First *Book of Common Prayer* of 1549 and has continued to appear in successive Prayer Books down through the centuries, being found in our Rite I Eucharist today. In our 1928 Prayer Book, it was one of the "comfortable words" of Jesus which were said by the priest before the Eucharistic Prayer. In today's Gospel lesson, we find these words in their fuller context. And I think that, within this fuller context, we will discover that these "comfortable words" may not mean what we thought them to mean. Indeed, the word "comfort" originally meant "to strengthen" – "com" (with) plus "forte" (strength). There is a medieval woodcut that shows soldiers mounted on their horses ready for battle, and their king riding behind them with a lance, prodding them on; and the caption of the woodcut says, "the king comforts his troops." So, I would like to look at the last 3 verses of today's Gospel with fresh eyes, and consider three things that Jesus mentions in these verses: 1) what Jesus has in mind when he invites those who "are weary and carrying heavy burdens" to come to him, and he will give them rest; 2) what is meant by Jesus' "yoke;" and 3) what Jesus means when he says, "Learn from me."

First, Jesus says, "Come to me, all you that are weary and are carrying heavy burdens, and I will give you rest."

Fr. John Shea says that "this invitation goes out to all who are world weary, who can no longer find zest and pleasure in life, whose backs are bent with the burdens

of each day. This is an invitation to all of suffering humanity, especially those whose suffering has caused them to lose heart.

“Jesus promises them rest. But this does not mean less work and more sleep... [Rather,] rest happens when our *true nature* is realized. If St. Augustine was right and our hearts are restless until they rest in God, then Jesus promises to introduce [the world-weary] to the God who will fulfill them and restore to them the goodness of creation. This *inner* realization of rest happens when we live in harmony with ourselves, our neighbor, nature, and God.”¹ Yet how many of us have heard Jesus’ promise to give us rest and imagined that Jesus wanted us to relax, unwind, and put our feet up?

Rest – as Jesus is speaking of it here – happens when we are living from our True Selves rather than our ego selves, our False Selves. So often we live our lives focused on bolstering our self-image, putting on a good face, or jockeying around in order to get a leg up on someone else, achieving some sense of power or moral superiority, proving ourselves right and righteous, building our ego. Not that this is all bad; building a strong ego is necessary in the early stages of our lives. But this often takes a significant amount of psychic energy, and the older we get, the harder this ego self is to maintain. As we age, we lose our physical beauty, our physical strength, and the world we once held by the tail has gotten away from us. What we need to realize is that this self-image, this persona we had projected to the world (and often identified with strongly) was never who we are in God to begin with. Jesus is saying that when we who are wearied by protecting our egos and self-image can come to him, who sees and accepts us as we **really** are in our True Selves, **then** we *indeed* find rest. We are accepted and loved “just as I am, without one plea.” We find rest from the futility of pretending to be what we are not; we find rest from the constant effort of shoring up our egos and personas; we find rest from “spinning our wheels” in the attainment of things which do not satisfy the soul. The rest that Jesus offers those who come to him is not of the “take a break, put up your feet and relax” variety; rather it is “I don’t have to pretend anymore; I can be who I am.” THAT kind of rest!

Jesus next says, “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, obviously, taking on a yoke means we are going to do some work. So any illusion that the “rest” Jesus promises means cessation from work should be dismissed. But Jesus emphasizes that the work he asks of us is not onerous, for, in the first place, we don’t do it *alone*: we are yoked *with* Jesus in performing God’s work. It is HIS yoke we are taking. Secondly, we can gain **another** insight if we note that the word “yoke” was commonly used in Jesus’ day to refer to the requirements of the Jewish Law (Acts 15:10²). Now, as Fr. John Shea points out, many of these “laws [were] endless and petty; they defeat[ed] the human spirit rather than [nurturing] it.”¹ **Jesus’** yoke – his “law” – is easy and his

burden light precisely because we were *created for* the work he asks us to do, which is the work of bringing forth God's Kingdom on earth by keeping **his** laws: loving God and our neighbor.³ **This** work *nurtures* the human spirit because we were made for this!

Finally, Jesus says, "learn from me." I think that when we read these three Gospel verses, we tend to focus on the "rest" first, and then the "yoke;" but rarely do we take note of Jesus' instruction to "learn from me." What does it mean to "learn from" Jesus? Bible scholar Tom Wright notes: "Jesus had come to know his father the way a son does: not by studying books about him, but by living in his presence, listening for his voice, and learning from him as an apprentice does from a master, by watching and imitating."⁴ And **we** come to know God by watching and imitating *Jesus*. Jesus came into the world not to teach **about** God, but to *reveal* God, living **in** and **through** himself, and to apprentice **us** to live and act the way he himself lived and acted. This is how we "learn from" him! In Jesus' acts of healing, he revealed God's desire to heal and reconcile; and he models *for us* the important work of healing and reconciliation. Through Jesus' compassion for society's outcasts, he revealed **God's** compassion for the least and the lost; and he apprentices us to show compassion for society's outcasts in our *own* time and place. By pouring out his life for us on the cross, Jesus revealed that the persons of the Trinity are continually pouring themselves out for each other, and that when we are living in our essential God nature (for we were **made** in the image of God), we, too, will be continually pouring ourselves out for God and our neighbor, receiving the love of God and neighbor fully, pouring ourselves out again, and receiving again, and on and on in one Divine, Trinitarian Flow.

"[God], you have made us for yourself," St. Augustine said, "and our heart is restless until it finds its rest in you." There **is** a deep, inner part of us which longs to return to the intimate relationship with our Trinitarian God that was intended for us when we were created. Jesus' statements in today's Gospel appeal to that deeper inner longing for return to our True Self and **God's** purposes for our lives. When we who are world-weary come to him, take his yoke upon ourselves and learn from him, we find that his yoke is easy and his burden light, because we were **made** for this! And we will find rest; for we will have come home to our True self in God.

AMEN

¹ John Shea, *On Earth as it is in Heaven*, Collegeville, MN: Liturgical Press, 2004, p. 221

² "Now therefore why are you putting God to the test by placing on the neck of the disciples a yoke that neither our ancestors nor we have been able to bear?" *Acts 15:10 (NRSV)*

³ Matthew 22:37-40

⁴ Wright, T., 2004. *Matthew for Everyone, Part 1: Chapters 1-15*, pp. 136–137. London: Society for Promoting Christian Knowledge.