

BIBLE READINGS: Romans 7:15-25a Matthew 11:16-19,25-30

SERMON

The passage we read aloud during our confession time from Paul's letter to the Romans is stark and confronting. It raises so many questions, that I find it difficult to have it read in a worship service without preaching on it. And in the Matthew reading, we hear Jesus saying, "Come to me all you who are worn out from carrying heavy burdens," and then going on to talk about taking on his "yoke" which of course is an image that comes from the equipment used to attach a bullock to a dray or a plough, and so evokes questions of who we are working for; who's holding the reins. And in the Romans reading Paul talks about being unable to do the good that he wants to do and ending up doing things he hates, and attributing this to a burden of sin that has weighed him down and gotten hold of his reins and made a slave of him. It doesn't take too much imagination to hear the words of Jesus as being addressed to those who can relate only too well to the predicament that Paul writes so painfully about.

We can miss the significance of Paul's picture if we over spiritualise his language. The idea that we are unable to follow through on our own good intentions because we are under the control of sin is not some purely spiritual idea that cannot be comprehended unless you have all the theological categories to interpret it through. What Paul is saying is really no different to the experience of the smokers who have good intentions of giving up but find themselves unable to overcome the drive of the cravings. It is no different from the business executives who have good intentions of spending more relaxed hours with their kids but find themselves unable to overcome the expectations - their own and others' - that keep them in the office for sixty or seventy hours a week. It is no different from many of us who have good intentions of simplifying our lifestyles and consuming less but find ourselves constantly succumbing to the hook of the advertisers that tell us that buying this product or that service will actually help us to achieve tranquillity and fullness of life. If we were each to take an inventory of our own lives and add up all the areas in which we had the desire but not the freedom to fulfil our good intentions, I think most of us would easily identify ourselves with the overburdened and enslaved to whom Jesus says, "Come to me and I will give you rest."

But before we go any further, it is worth noting another bit of background, the context in which Matthew sets this saying of Jesus. It's worth noting because it is a warning about where rest and salvation are not going to be found. Matthew sets this saying as the conclusion to a series of encounters and sayings of Jesus that all throw the spotlight on those who see what he does and hear his message but just don't get it. In the part we heard, Jesus compares them to children in the schoolyard who just can't get on with one another. Nothing is good enough for them, so they end up missing out on the game altogether. He illustrates this with people's contrasting reactions to himself and John the baptiser. "John was a teetotaller, and was frequently fasting; and people accused him of being a fanatic and a wowser. Then when I come, always ready to share a meal and a drink, they call me a drunk and a glutton, and say I'm too close to people whose lifestyles are beyond the pale!"

And then Jesus goes on to speak in prayer about how God's truth is hidden from the experts and intellectuals, but is revealed to the children. This is a loud caution to people like me with tertiary degrees in theology and the like. Jesus is saying that my intellectual sophistication may actually blind me to the truth so that I miss the boat. One of the problems that comes to those of us who have accomplished academic success, especially in theology, is that we can be so caught up in constructing our own ideologies about what God is supposed to be doing in the world, that we overlook what God is actually doing right in front of our noses. We begin to trust so much in our own theories that we expect God to conform to our presumptions instead of looking with open minds to see what God is actually doing, and hitching ourselves

to God's wagon, whether or not it makes intellectual sense to us. Jesus is saying that those who are not encumbered by too much theory and theology may actually be, like children, much more able to just catch the movement of the moment and go with it.

Which brings us back to the call and promise that Jesus offers at the end. "Come to me, all you who are worn out and stressed out, and I will give you rest." And then in describing how this comes about he uses this unusual image:

"Take my yoke upon you, and learn from me, for my yoke is easy and my burden is light."

The yoke is a contraption that is used to attach an ox or a bullock to whatever it has to pull. Usually they work in pairs so the yoke lays across the shoulders of both with a frame around the neck of each. The word translated "easy" as in "my yoke is easy" does not necessarily mean that there's nothing much to pull, but that the yoke fits well and so does not rub and cut into the flesh as the bullock pulls against it. Exactly where Jesus is positioning himself in relation to this image is a bit ambiguous, but either way still works in the context of the promise. Jesus could be calling us to take his yoke in the sense that he is the bullock driver who holds the reins. We would be working for him under his directions. This would sit as an appealing contrast to the picture we took from Romans, where we were wanting to break the power of sin over us, to grab the reins from the hands of sin but rather give control instead to one who would enable us to fulfil our best intentions and become the people we were created to be. "Come to me," says Jesus, "and hand me the reins." What a relief!

But Jesus may be doing even more than offering to hold the reins and call the shots. When he says, "Take my yoke upon you, and learn from me," it sounds like we may be supposed to learn from him by doing what he does, and a bullock doesn't learn by doing what the bullock driver does, but by doing what a more experienced bullock does. Jesus may well be thinking of the paired bullocks with double yoke here. He may actually be calling us to be paired with him in a double yoke, pulling together, working together on the same job. This makes some sense, because the word 'disciple' means something more like apprentice than pupil - we learn on the job from the qualified worker, not from the books and the lecture. "Come to me," says Jesus, "and get into the harness with me and work shoulder to shoulder with me."

What an attractive call to those of us who have felt driven into the ground by forces that are too great for us and which have no care for our welfare.

Whichever way we hear this call, Jesus is promising us that the way out from under the control of these forces which cripple our ability to be what we yearn to be, is to offer ourselves to him and to take on his work. While the image of taking on new work may not immediately sound like an image of rest, Jesus is saying that this work fits, and because it fits it is easy and light and gives rest to our souls. Perhaps any attempt to do nothing is just another variation on the slavery to selfishness and corruption, but to take on the yoke of Jesus is the only way to avoid being yoked by something else.

Fulfilment will only be found in taking on the yoke that fits right, putting our shoulder to the task for which we were created, and the best news of all is that that means being yoked to one who is gentle and humble in heart and who enables our whole being to relax and be at peace.