

## The Sermon - Revd Charles Draper - 7 July 2020

“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.” Last July, just a year ago, I went on a two-day clergy pre-retirement residential, provided for us by the diocese. We had good practical talks on finance and housing, but what was most helpful were the discussion groups, where we shared and discussed what we thought retirement might mean for us. The context they gave us was of seeing retirement as “the next stage in our journey of discipleship”.

I found that a most helpful context – challenging and inspiring but also quite open-ended. I am not yet sure what retirement will mean for me, whether it will involve preaching or maybe writing or simply loving and supporting my family and being a friend to our neighbours. But whatever it is, it will certainly not be an end.

These words of Jesus at the end of our gospel reading today have always been one of my favourite passages in the gospels – words that I have come back to many times. Right now they seem almost autobiographical for me. In a few days’ time I will be laying down the burden of church leadership – a responsibility I have carried now for 27 years. In its place I will be taking on a new journey. “Take my yoke upon you” may seem at first a difficult image, but actually I believe it is a very positive one, as I will go on to discuss later in the sermon.

But first Jesus invites us to stop and to rest. The Church of England has a very wise policy of not allowing retired clergy to take up any form of new ministry until six months after their retirement. So I am seeing this autumn, when Jane goes back to school and the boys go back to university and college, as a kind of Sabbatical. It is twelve years since my last (and only) Sabbatical – so I am ready for this! There will of course be plenty of practical work to do – and I may do some writing to keep the creative juices working! Then a new year will begin...

Farewells are always sad occasions – yet another bereavement for us as we have found every time we have moved on from a parish. We will be very sad to be saying goodbye to so many who have become good friends. And yet overall I have no regrets – I’ve had a good stint – 33 years in parish ministry in all! And to be honest, as medication has become less effective, and my “off meds” times of day have become longer and deeper, I know that it is time to go.

But these words of Jesus are not just about retirement! They can have many different meanings for us in our different situations. When Jesus spoke these words, I think he was referring to the burden of “the Law”, as taught by the Pharisees and Teachers of the Law in his day. His most trenchant criticism of them was that they laid heavy burdens on others that they couldn’t carry themselves. Jesus’ natural instinct was to stand up for the oppressed and the afflicted. He tells them that they do not need to carry this burden anymore and invites them to come to him and to lay it down.

Fortunately, in our churches today, we are not generally burdened down by “the Law”. But there may be other burdens we are carrying. Many people carry a heavy burden of guilt. This is why Jesus’ promise of forgiveness is so

liberating. As I thought about this sermon I realised I still carry in my subconscious an image from a childhood picture book of "Pilgrim's Progress". In its opening pages were vivid pictures of a man carrying a huge burden – almost bigger than he was. As he climbs to the top of a hill on which stands the Cross, the burden falls from his back, rolls down the hill and disappears into a hole. It is a vivid and beautiful picture – and actually – right.

The words we hear at every church service, promising us forgiveness, can help us to believe and know this liberation from guilt. Jesus's promise of forgiveness means that the burden of guilt is one we do not need to carry. For me now, as I suspect for many others, the greater burden is the burden of anxiety. Of all the symptoms of Parkinsons, anxiety is the most irritating! Jesus clearly understood our problem with anxiety – why else would he argue in such depth why we do not need to worry!

The early Christians, often suffering from persecution, had plenty to worry about. St Paul writes:

"Do not worry about anything, but in everything by prayer and supplication with thanksgiving let your requests be made known to God." (Philippians 4 v 6)

And St Peter writes:

"Cast all your anxiety on him, because he cares for you." (1 Peter 5 v 7)

There is no sense here that we are wrong to be anxious, or that we should simply ignore our anxious feelings. The point is that God understands and he cares. So he invites us to hand over our cares to him, and he promises to carry them for us. So Jesus invites us to lay our burdens down and find freedom and liberation. But in exchange, he 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."

When I was in Ethiopia on my Sabbatical twelve years ago, I saw farmers ploughing the fields with a pair of oxen. Where you have small fields and steep gradients, they can be more effective than a tractor! I am told that when a younger bullock needs to be trained, he is yoked together with an older one who can guide him and lead him. This I believe is what Jesus is saying here – "Take my yoke upon you" means "share my yoke with me" - and learn from me.

For me, this gives me a picture of Jesus as almost like an elder brother, who knows the way and guides me. He is often challenging, and sometimes even disturbing – but he never condemns, but rather takes us by the hand and leads us safely on our journey.

Next Sunday I intend to say more about the love of Jesus for us. But for now I want to focus on the practical, and ask, what does it mean when Jesus says, "my yoke is easy, and my burden is light"?

When I was young, like many people I went on a Duke of Edinburgh expedition. I actually enjoyed it, but I do remember that carrying the tent, food, sleeping bag, warm clothing and waterproofs was a heavy burden. Later on, I used to go youth hostelling. I still had to carry clothes, waterproofs and a little food, but the burden was much lighter, and I had a rucksack that actually fitted me. And actually, after a while I forgot I was carrying it, and could walk for miles, enjoying the scenery as I went.

A well fitted backpack – perfectly fitted and not over heavy, is not a heavy burden. Much of the time you hardly notice you are carrying it, and instead of wearing you out, it makes you stronger.

Perhaps the burden that Jesus gives us is like that. He calls us to do those tasks where we are the most gifted – tasks that may be hard at times, but that also bring us joy and fulfilment.

Of course, it isn't always like that. Sometimes we just have to muscle in where help is needed! But in the long term, I believe that God calls us to work that fits us – like a well fitted backpack. As we go on in life, we may find that we feel a different burden.

As sons and daughters of God, we share with our Father in his burden of compassion for the world, and especially for those who are suffering. This is good and leads us to prayer and action. But even here we must always bear this with God and never by ourselves. That way the burden will not overwhelm us.

So for me, God's calling is about to change dramatically. And although the timing is strange, I know that God's timing is perfect.

Whatever burdens we are carrying, I pray that we are able to hand them over to God, and that we can let him bear the burden for us. And be reassured that the burden he gives us, his call for us, will not be over heavy, but will fit our gifts and abilities like a well fitted backpack. I would like to finish with a poem:

*Many a ship has sailed from port to port  
with no interference from Me,  
because Strong Will has been at the wheel.  
Multitudes of pleasure cruisers  
go merrily on their ways,  
untouched by the power of My hand.*

*But you have put your life into My keeping,  
and because you are  
depending on Me for guidance and direction,  
I shall give it.*

*Move on steadily,  
and know that the waters that carry you  
are the waters of My love and My kindness,  
and I will keep you on the right course.*

Francis J Roberts (from "Come away, My beloved")