

Grace mercy and peace to you from God our Father and our Lord and Saviour Jesus Christ. Amen

When we read the scriptures, we need to consider what pictures the words put in our head. Today several pictures should come to mind when we hear the gospel reading. I want to look at these pictures under 3 categories and these will be the three categories of our sermon: the complaint, the burden, and the yoke.

Jesus says:

¹⁶ “But to what shall I compare this generation? It is like children sitting in the marketplaces and calling to their playmates,

¹⁷ “‘We played the flute for you, and you did not dance;
we sang a dirge, and you did not mourn.’

¹⁸ For John came neither eating nor drinking, and they say, ‘He has a demon.’ ¹⁹ The Son of Man came eating and drinking, and they say, ‘Look at him! A glutton and a drunkard, a friend of tax collectors and sinners!’ Yet wisdom is justified by her deeds.” Matthew 11:16–19 (ESV)

The picture that comes to mind here should be two-fold. Firstly, there should be a picture of the children in the marketplace and secondly there should be a picture which is a contrast between John the Baptist and Jesus the Messiah. The children in the marketplace are complaining because when they play lively music people don't dance, what a buzz kill! ‘When I play funeral music other people don't mourn, why won't they join in?’ The picture is supposed to make the listener think about the connection between this analogy and the explanation that follows. The hearer should know that kids like to complain, ‘you never wanna join in with my games, with my music and dancing!’ and then when they make the connection, they should realise that they're the complaining children.

The complaint is against John the Baptist and Jesus. But rather than complain about the actual problem they complain about John's behaviour and Jesus' actions. This isn't the real complaint it is a mask for the actual problem. They complain that John spent all his time in the wilderness fasting, eating weird foods when he does eat, and the accusation is that he must be demon possessed. The complaint against Jesus is that he is the opposite, he spends all his time eating and drinking and he does it with sinners and tax collectors. What do these whingers want from God!? Did they only want a mellow prophet that fits in with their behaviour? They will never get it. They're masking their complaint which is really that they don't like what John and Jesus are saying. They don't like that John tells them that they are sinners and must repent, they don't like that Jesus goes to those burdened by sin and brings his forgiveness. How little we have changed.

These complainants show that they are greatly burdened by the law. Their complaints point out that their consciences have not been cleansed, they have been pricked by the law, they have been convicted by the law, but they do not know the forgiveness of God. They fail to see the God of the psalmists, God, who is slow to anger, abounding in steadfast love, gracious and merciful. They fail to see that God is coming to forgive even their sins. When we complain against the preacher, against the church, against God for the messengers he sent us, we join them with the same burdens. Our consciences have been pricked by the law, convicted by the law, but we failed to find the God who forgives.

This was Paul's predicament also. And even after his dramatic conversion Paul still struggles with the burden of the law, for his sinful nature continues to overcome his mind and the Holy Spirit who lives in him.

¹⁵ For I do not understand my own actions. For I do not do what I want, but I do the very thing I hate.

¹⁹ For I do not do the good I want, but the evil I do not want is what I keep on doing. ²⁰ Now if I do what I do not want, it is no longer I who do it, but sin that dwells within me.

²² For I delight in the law of God, in my inner being, ²³ but I see in my members another law waging war against the law of my mind and making me captive to the law of sin that dwells in my members. ²⁴ Wretched man that I am! Who will deliver me from this body of death? Romans 7:15, 19–20, 22–24 (ESV)

You see in his final lines that when Paul sees his own sin, he looks at himself and he's greatly burdened, and he says to himself 'how stupid am I?'. 'How and why do I continue to commit the same sins?' 'Sins I know God has commanded me to flee from, my body continues to indulge them. I am captivated by this sin, it is holding me to ransom, even as one who is saved by God.' He even reveals this to the Romans after he has just told them; For just as you once presented your members as slaves to impurity and to lawlessness leading to more lawlessness, so now present your members as slaves to righteousness leading to sanctification. Romans 6:19 (ESV)

And

²² But now that you have been set free from sin and have become slaves of God, the fruit you get leads to sanctification and its end, eternal life. ²³ For the wages of sin is death, but the free gift of God is eternal life in Christ Jesus our Lord. Romans 6:22–23 (ESV)

What a great gift of vulnerability the apostles give to us, when they reveal they continue to struggle with sin, even while proclaiming that we are free because of Christ. What a great relief to know that the burden of sin I carry is certainly no greater than that of St Paul who has a courage to exclaim,

²⁴ Wretched man that I am! Who will deliver me from this body of death? Romans 7:24 (ESV) When he says this he expects us all to join in and say the same. What a wretched sinner I am!

This is the burden of the law!

Back to Jesus pictures in today's gospel, he says, ²⁸ Come to me, all who labor and are heavy laden, and I will give you rest. ²⁹ Take my yoke upon you, and learn from me, for I am gentle and lowly in heart, and you will find rest for your souls. ³⁰ For my yoke is easy, and my burden is light." Matthew 11:28–30 (ESV)

Not only does Jesus know our complaints against God, that he continually points out as sin, he knows how sinful we are, he knows how much we have damaged our lives and the lives of those around us and how we have been damaged by the sins of the people around us. That is why he ate and drank with sinners. Jesus spent time with the sinners because he knew their burdens. Jesus invites sinners to lay their burdens on him.

A yoke can join two animals, such as oxen, horses, or donkeys so that they can pull evenly, in front of a plough or cart. Yes, the yoke is a picture of burden being applied, it is a picture of hard work, of bondage, of slavery. It is a picture of the burdens that we carry, the sin that enslaves us. Jesus wants us to understand his yoke in an entirely different fashion. He does not want us to come to him thinking that he has a burden to place up on us, a demand that we should achieve. He comes to us and in offering his yoke, he offers to unburden us.

He wants us to understand that when we take on his yoke, he does all the work. He lifts the burden of sin from our shoulders. He takes our yoke of sin and carries it on his back, on his cross. He takes all our burdens, our lives that are destroyed by sinful actions, a conscience that is in anguish over our eternal life, he bears them on the cross. That is why he says his yoke is easy, he is carrying it for us. That is why he said come to

me all you who are weary and heavy laden, and I will give you rest. Because he takes the yoke from your shoulders. Here is your Saviour today inviting you to unburden yourself to lay down your sins, your burdened conscience, your damaged lives and rest in his grace and mercy, in his steadfast love, to let your soul rest.

Jesus' yoke is complete freedom and unburdening of our conscience. It is a clear conscience at peace with God and with one another. Jesus unburdens our conscience, he puts on us his yoke, or better yet removes from us the yoke of slavery to sin when he proclaims, 'your sins are forgiven.' He unburdens us in the absolution. He unburdens us when he unites us to the Father and to each other as he feeds us his body and blood in the sacrament and proclaims, 'this is my body, for you, this is my blood given for you for the forgiveness of sins!' He unburdens us as we daily repent, drown our sinful nature and rise to new life as we have already been delivered new life on his cross and by his breaking out of the tomb. He unburdens us as we live in and cling to our baptismal life as we learnt in Romans 6.

In my visiting and listening it has been reinforced that there is a very real application to Jesus' rest and yoke for many of you regarding sins of the past. Things that you wish you had not done, mistakes that you have made, even sinning wilfully at times, that now cause you guilt and shame. I know this same pain; I have often struggled with overwhelming anxiety of things I have said or done wrong in past encounters. I even agonise over encounters from school and all through parish ministry when I know I have not delivered what was expected nor acted in a way befitting to a pastor, I join with Paul in exclaiming, 'Wretched man that I am! Who will deliver me from this body of death?' Jesus wants us to rest from these burdens, to leave them with him. To bask in his forgiveness, to glory in his peace. He does not want us to stay enslaved to the consequences of our sins, or the lies of Satan who would see us bound to our troubled conscience for eternity. Instead, Jesus wants us weary and burdened to come to him and rest. To hear his word and promises and rest in his peace. To hear his forgiveness and carry his yoke is easy so that our conscience is no longer wearied.

In my visiting and listening it has been reinforced that there is a very real application to Jesus' rest and yoke for this congregation and parish. He wants you to be unburdened, he wants you to take on his yoke and not carry the burdened conscience of congregational encounters and apparent pastoral discretions. He does not want you to feel guilt for your previous actions, he wants you to live unburdened and at peace because you belong to him. He does not want you to be burdened by shame, that is the feeling you have because others have sinned against you, or against ones you love, he wants you to be rested, at peace with him and one another. He does not want you to go on being wearied and heavy laden, he wants to give you rest. He does not want you to carry guilt for things you have said and done, he wants you to be at peace, relieved of your guilt, forgiven! Here in this place, surrounded by fellow sinners, he wants to give you rest. Here at this table, surrounded by the whole company of heaven, he wants you to take on his yoke. Here at this font, he wants you to leave your sins in their watery grave. Here is this divine service the one true God wants to serve you with his peace.

He says, ²⁸Come to me, all who labor and are heavy laden, and I will give you rest. ²⁹Take my yoke upon you, and learn from me, for I am gentle and lowly in heart, and you will find rest for your souls. ³⁰For my yoke is easy, and my burden is light." Matthew 11:28–30 (ESV)

Amen

Peace