

Reflection Thursday 16th July 2020

Matthew 11: 28-30

“Come to me, all you who are weary and burdened, 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.”



Just a few lines. A few short lines of invitation – perhaps The Invitation with a capital “T” and a capital “I”. And yet what a summons! At the point where we are just so weary, when our eyes are tired from searching, where our feet are sore from treading the rough ground underfoot, at that very moment we hear the invitation. Clear. We *are* all exhausted, we’ve been working hard, the new technologies, the demands of an ever-changing landscape are complicated and stressful. We *are* weary. This call, this promise of rest today feels closer than ever.

It is the call of discipleship.

It is the call of the concerned parent to come home. Like the whispering of my father on my wedding day – “We love you. If you ever need to, just come home.”

It’s the call from a trusted work colleague – “We’ve got to get this work done, so let’s get together and crack on it with eh?”

It is the call of the friend – “I can see you are stressed out, just come round. I’ll put the kettle on.”

Most of all it is the call of the lover – “Come to me. Stop looking, you have found love.”

For me it is the call to curl up in the quiet place, hidden in the wounds of Christ, hidden from the world in that place where I can just be without needing any of the trappings of life. A place where there are no expectations, no striving, just a desire to

be wrapped in the arms of love. It is The oubliette, a place of forgetting, and it reminds me of a line in a song by India Arie –“*I'd quickly give my freedom, to be held by your captivity.*” It's a song she wrote for a lover, but then she realised that actually she had written it as a prayer.

Jesus promises rest and refreshment, but he doesn't promise a rest from work. A yoke is a tool for work. But it is a tool that links two animals together so that the workload can be shared evenly. Sometimes an older, more experienced animal is yoked to a younger less experienced one, so that the less experienced one can learn while the two work together. The older animal will be a calming, less anxious presence for the other while they learn.

Jesus is asking us to share with him in his work, for others but also for ourselves. We are not asked to do this in our strength but in sharing his.

God willing, my priesting will be three weeks tomorrow and so, not surprisingly, I have been reflecting on the ordinal (although we've not had a copy of the liturgy yet and it will be only a 45 minute service, so at this stage we are not sure what's included and what's not so I'm hedging my bets by reflecting on all of it!) and on page 39 the nature of Jesus' invitation is echoed very clearly, when we are reminded of the partnership we are entering into:

“You cannot bear the weight of this calling in your own strength, but only by the grace and power of God. Pray therefore that your heart may daily be enlarged and your understanding of the Scriptures enlightened.

Pray earnestly for the gift of the Holy Spirit.”

The weight of this calling. I don't yet have an understanding of what that truly means. I have some idea, as the series of ontological changes sweeping through every aspect of my life as an ordained deacon have been shaping and moulding my very being, but I know there is still more to come.

Jesus wants us to come to him and learn from him in this ongoing relationship. It doesn't just end with a title or a collar. It begins with a shared yoke. We trust that he will equip us, teach us and guide us to be living out his loving service wherever we are. But only if we allow him to do that. Only if we are willing to share the load. We need to remember that our strength and our rest comes from him. We trust in his promise of rest and refreshment for our souls and like the younger animal yoked to the older more experienced one, if we work with him we will become more like him, gentle and humble in heart. But it takes work. Let's not pretend it doesn't. It needs to be an active partnership.

But the yoke Jesus gives us is easy. It is easy because he shares it with us. It only becomes hard when we are trying to do it in our own strength. It is easy because it is life-giving, not only to us, but to all those around us. In every aspect of our lives there is a sense of “fit” – the yoke we bear with him is shaped and suited to us as individuals according to our gifts and different ministries.

We do have our burdens, but they are not what you think. They're not the difficulties, the problems in life but instead our burden is the responsibility we have as followers of Jesus. We are responsible for how we think, how we behave, how we live and most importantly how we love. If we try to manage this ourselves it can seem weighty and sometimes unwieldy in our hands and we can fail. Because it is unbalanced. But if we live our lives yoked with Jesus, we share the load, we learn from the teacher and our work is not tiresome or burdensome but freeing and energetic.

As I am tying all this together with my thoughts and reflections as I approach my priesting I want to share with you something that felt like a joining up for me – when we practice Lectio Divina as you know there is usually a word or a phrase that jumps out at us, or sticks in our mind. For me reading this passage the word was “gentle”. For many reasons I seek to be gentle like Christ, I find it the most difficult thing, particularly with myself. And yet when I hide in his wounds, in that place of forgetting, I find amidst the grotesqueness of the violence by which his precious body was so brutally scarred, I find a softness, a gentleness that enfolds me completely. I can find rest.

When I am priested on the 7th August it will be 15 years to the day since I was first ordained as an Interfaith Minister. As part of our ordination then we had to write our own vow. I attended the seminary for two years and we were told at the beginning we would have to write our vows. I wrestled with finding these words from day one. It is only now that they are beginning to make sense as I seek to partner with the gentleness and humility of my living God.

I vow to live with honour and integrity.
To hold myself gently
in the divine light of God,
and so be a presence of loving grace
for myself and for others,
committed to true and truthful service.

Amen