

Sermon preached at Gisborne, 5 July, 2020

Guide us, O God, by your Word and spirit, that in your light we may see light, in your truth, find freedom, and in your will discover your peace, through Jesus Christ, our Lord. Amen.

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

Take my yoke!

Nowadays, we rarely see yokes. In the past, a yoke was used to fasten over the necks of two animals and attached to the plough or cart that they were to pull. A yoke is often used with negative connotations of oppression and burden-bearing. Even so, Jesus says to us, “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.” (v. 29). It seems that he is inviting us to become his yoke mate and learn how to pull the load together. So we’ll explore it with three points: first what is there in this invitation – ‘take my yoke’, second, what we will experience as Jesus’ yoke mate, and lastly, the meaning of ‘take my yoke’ in today’s context.

1. An Invitation to take Jesus’ Yoke

When we hear the word ‘yoke,’ the first thing that comes to mind may be a symbol of burden-bearing and oppression.¹ As seen, a yoke is laid on the necks and shoulders of oxen and also on prisoners of war and slaves. As noticed, this invitation is issued to the law-burdened, whose shoulders ‘the scribes and the Pharisees’ have laid an intolerable load,² not to the work-burdened, or the sin-burdened. Jesus does not propose that we go yoke-free, but it will be easy and light³ because his yoke is *chrēstos* (χρηστός) - kind or mild. He may have seen how the well-made yokes would serve both master and oxen well from Joseph, the carpenter – his earthly father. In fact, Jesus invites those who yoked to the law to take his yoke instead. In doing so, they can continue to fulfil the law of Moses while having the rest of the soul which became weary by the harsh religious and political systems. The word ‘rest’ (*anapausis* - ἀνάπαυσις) can refer to Sabbath rest, the rest of death, or rest from war when Israel’s enemies have been subdued.⁴ Rest also functions as an image of salvation. When the world is finally ordered according to God’s purposes, the creation will enjoy its full and complete Sabbath as in Genesis 2:3, which reads, “So God blessed the seventh day and hallowed it, because on it God rested from all the work that he had done in creation.” In promising ‘rest,’ Jesus promises life under God’s reign in the new world that he is bringing into being.

Second, this invitation is for the weary and the infants, not for the strong and the wise. The infants are not regarded as wise or important. In Beatitude,⁵ Jesus calls certain groups of people blessed that include the poor in spirit, the meek, the merciful, the persecuted. In his ministry, Jesus identifies these people from the sick, the lame, the lepers and demon-possessed, the tax collectors and sinners, not from the priests, the scribes and the Pharisees. It is because they are the ones who come to Jesus for healing of body and spirit. Jesus sees these infants see what the ‘wise’ cannot – that he is sent by the Father and reveals God the Father.⁶ By taking his yoke, the infants and the weary experience healings that helps them endure things in the world by allowing them to live in God’s grace and love.

Third, taking Jesus’ yoke means that he will be with us till the end during this faith journey. Animals who yoked together are not free to go its direction. Its bond to the other animal serves as a constraint. Animals with a yoke are under the control of the master so they would not go astray. But taking Jesus’ yoke is not such a simple one-off process. It involves spiritual warfare within one’s self.

2. A yoke of Jesus vs a yoke of sin

In Romans 7:15-25a, the apostle Paul shows what a yoke of Jesus is and what a yoke of sin in this well-known passage. Here, we’ll focus on two things – the state of sin and the power of sin. The state of sin is briefly described in Romans 1:21, in that all have failed to acknowledge the existence and power of God. That is, not knowing who God is and whose we are that is sin. The rest of the things that we usually think of as sins are simply the outcomes of the sin. Here Paul is not concerned about all humanity. Instead, it is more about a religious person (including Paul himself), who is the responsible member of the human community, the one who wants to be a contributing member of society. Despite every attempt to accomplish good for others and self, the efforts of the religious person come to nothing. The power of sin is described in vs. 15-20, which is a fundamental human conflict between willing and doing. In the course of Christian history, so many people have been wrestling with the same issue. For some, it was about sin, for others, keeping the law, or justification or righteousness, or

¹ Genesis 27:40; Leviticus 26:13; Deuteronomy 28:48; Acts 15:10; 1 Timothy 6:1; and many more.

² Matthew 23:4

³ Matthew 11:30 ὁ γὰρ ζυγός μου **χρηστός** καὶ τὸ φορτίον μου ἑλαφρόν ἐστίν

⁴ Especially in LXX – Septuagint

⁵ Matthew 5:3-12

⁶ Matthew 11:27

identity and so forth. The subject matters that have made them struggled may differ, but the root of all the issues is the same – the desire to become one’s own master while leaving God behind. So being Jesus’ yoke mate is not such a light issue for believers as it requires our whole being to become subjects under the reign of God.

3. *The life of Jesus’ yoke mate*

What is the yoke Jesus offers? We might infer that it is his teaching, his way of discipleship, which is not burdensome but life-giving. To take his yoke upon oneself is to be yoked to the one in whom God’s kingdom of justice, mercy, and compassion is breaking into this world, and to find the rest for which the soul longs. While the original context is concerned about the burden of the Jewish law, what makes us weary today, do you think? It may include all sorts of life issues such as jobs, marriage, money, health, family, security and old age. Sometimes it is more about loneliness, criticism or opposition, and a thousand other things.

In our story time, we heard about Mr Plumbean’s misfortune and his decisions to transform his house into something extraordinary. The people who live on Mr Plumbean’s street are upset as the changes have brought disruptions to their street. For many, this story may be about conformity versus individuality. But we may read it differently through the biblical lens. My questions are; what is sin here? What made people visit Mr Plumbean at night? What is Jesus’ yoke in this story? If there is any, is Jesus’ yoke dangerous and destructive or what? More importantly, where are you in this story?

You don’t have to answer me right now. But think about these questions throughout the week. Listen to what God is saying to you through Matthew 11, Romans 7, together with the Big Orange Splot. We’ll continue this discussion more during Whakarongo (Listen) that will begin on Thursday, 23 July at 5:30 pm at St Andrew’s. From that point, Whakarongo will help us find fresh answers from all these questions about taking Jesus’ yoke, faith and life in Christ. Everyone is welcome. Amen!