

Reading: Matthew 11:25-30

And Jesus said, “Come to me all who labour and are heavy laden and I will give you rest.”

If anyone could use a break it’s Dr Ashley Bloomfield. Having lived and breathed COVID 19 for months he announced at a press conference that he would be taking a week off. He did it in his usual self-affronting style: “If you don’t mind, I’m taking a week off.” He’ll need to be very careful about where he goes because his face has become pretty recognisable. You can buy tee shirts with it on and coffee mugs, and tea towels with the inscription curve crusher. Whether we are running a country’s health system in a worldwide pandemic or simply running a household we can all get pretty tired. It can be exhausting hearing the news of deaths overseas and layoffs at home - and that’s without trying to get the kids to do their homework.

Weariness can come in lots of forms and can cast a long shadow over our lives. Sometimes weariness can even move into depression and despair. Jesus knew this so well and that is why he invites us today: “Come to me all who labour and are heavy laden 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 light.”

I like the Message version. 'Are you tired? Worn out? Burned out on religion? Come to me. Get away with me and you'll recover your life. I'll show you how to take a real rest. Walk with me and work with me— watch how I do it. Learn the unforced rhythms of grace. I won't lay anything heavy or ill-fitting on you. Keep company with me and you'll learn to live freely and lightly.'

Jesus offers relief to tired people and rest to the troubled and weary. He is refreshment and renewed strength. Jesus offers an easy yoke. The yoke was the harness of a working animal. It symbolised loads and toil. To the Jew it also

meant the yoke of slavery at the hands of foreign powers. Sadly, the very law that was meant to free them had become another yoke. The Pharisees had 616 rules that needed keeping.

Jesus yoke in contrast is not hurtful or unnatural. It is lined with mercy. Animals who are expected to pull heavy weights are sometimes yoked together to increase their capacity to carry a load. Jesus is inviting us his followers to be yoked with himself. That is quite a partner to assist in carrying weight. No wonder he predicts the burden will lighten. He promises rest for our souls - a deep rest for our weariness. In his willingness to be yoked, Jesus commits to a partnership with us. We are not left alone. Jesus is a gentle and humble partner - one to lean on.

For all its wonderful gifts Christian faith can sometimes feel like just another thing we have to do. A lot of sermons, Bible commentaries and well-meaning fellow Christians sometimes help us feel inadequate. 'If you just prayed more, or gave more, or served more ...' Rather than ease the burden we can feel even more burdened.

The people of Jesus day often experienced faith as a burden rather than a liberation. There were 616 laws they had to keep. There was a Sabbath police force to keep them in line. Faith was never meant to be like that.

The story goes that the Anglican bishop of Christchurch Allan Pyatt was talking about churchgoing with his Roman Catholic counterpart Basil Meeking. "How do you get your people to go to church?" he asked the Catholic bishop. "Oh, I just tell them they will go to hell if they don't." Bishop Pyatt commented, "My people just tell me to go to hell!"

Something is really wrong when the joy has gone out of our faith.

Jesus stands ready to minister to our deepest needs: our need for rest and refreshment, our need for a companion to carry the burden.

The story is told of St Anthony the Great. He was walking through the forest and he came upon a man chopping wood. The great saint watched for a while. It became pretty clear that the man's axe needed sharpening. "Excuse me, could I sharpen your axe for you?" the saint asked the weary man. "Go away," the man said, "I'm far too busy to stop for that." So, he left him as he struggled longer and harder to cut wood. How often could that story be told in our world; how often could that story be told of our lives?

Jesus is news of grace and freedom. We do not need to earn our way to heaven, there is nothing we must do. Jesus has done that for us on the cross. Our part is to lean into him and live in the flow of his grace. Joy Cowley our own New Zealand poet writes of the refreshment we find in Christ:

Today Lord I do not have a loving heart
It has grown tired like a wilting flower
In a drought-stricken garden
And I am burdened with self-reproach
Because I have nothing more to give the world
It happens, this, from time to time
And being tough on myself is dry comfort

Great lover I need time to rest beside your oasis
To fill up with the waters of your sweetness
And be nourished by your eternal kindness
You will hold me until all my *shoulds* and *should nots*
Fall away I like last year's leaves and I will feel again
Green growth beginning a new season

Then my heart will remember what my head forgets
That the greatest gift of your love
Is your life in me.

Take a moment to sit and rest. Intentionally offer your burdens to Jesus.
Allow him to take your burdens.

Prayer

Mighty One, take my burdens and free me from my weariness.

Let me walk beside you as we are yoked in partnership.

Thank you for providing rest for my soul.

Through Jesus Christ our Lord .

Amen