

'My yoke is easy'

Sermon by the Rev Derek Lightbourne, All Saints Belmont and St Alban's Pauatahanui
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Keynote Bible passage: Matthew 11.25 – 30

When Jesus said, 'Take my yoke upon you, my yoke is easy and my burden is light.' Perhaps our immediate response is of a heavy load, as a burden to bear. It is a very different contrast to the 'hard sayings' of Jesus of a couple of Sundays ago where he seemed to set impossible targets for living his way, as 'be perfect...' From this morning's gospel Jesus is recorded as saying 'My yoke is easy and my burden is light.'

Those of you familiar with the musical composition 'Messiah' will recall that composer Handel sets this passage almost in dance mode, with the sopranos tripping through semi-quavers, up and down the scale at fast tempo. Obviously, Handel had the right message for what Jesus was wanting to convey.

Having introduced this imagery – of the yoke, it's pretty unfamiliar to us in suburban Wellington, coming as it does out of a different culture and a different age. So in order to understand the passage more fully, and appreciate it for today, let's consider it in historical context. This would seem to reveal two aspects.

First, and we don't get it in English, rather from the Greek – where it is rendered being 'easy' literally it means 'well-fitting'. It is known that in Jesus' day the yoke of the cart fitted to the bullock was hand-made, so as not to irritate its neck. Indeed legend has it that in his days before ministry Jesus as carpenter made superb yokes. So he would have known what he was talking about.

Second there's of an underlying meaning that Jesus was referring to the offering of specific relief from the heavy burdens of Jewish legalism. Remember Jesus had said in another place, of the Pharisees: 'They tie up heavy burdens, hard to bear, and lay them on the shoulders of others.' (Mt 23.4) We know it from reading something of those rules for everything, in the early books of the Old Testament - aka Hebrew Bible, and those who try to read the Bible through get bogged down in the book of Leviticus. Thus people who then came to Jesus were exhausted from trying to find God through endless rules and regulations. No wonder they found him a breath of fresh air and indeed it was an expression of fresh hearing – 'my yoke is easy and my burden is light.'

How then is this imagery helpful for us in our Christian living?

1) In these days there are some churches which are quite legalistic, especially when it comes to finances and of tithing in particular. From this can develop a spiritual elitism, of expectations because no one wants to be seen as falling short. For awhile I was a chaplain to an Aglow chapter and heard women complaining about labouring under such expectations. Other churches have a dress code – and I especially noticed this in churches in Tonga – wearing white and women wearing hats. In our church such a culture doesn't exist although it may be fair to

suggest we do have certain habits - as about where we sit. However one does hear some complaints about tasks or jobs that are left to a few. Sometimes it can be difficult for ones to 'break in' where certain tasks are done by certain people. I am constantly on the lookout as to how newer attending folk can be incorporated into the ministry of the laity, sharing gifts and ministries and involvements. So when the *yoke is shared* it's a joy to be part of the community gathered as we encourage one another and build each other up.

2) There's another way in which we can regard this saying of Jesus, in our own Christian life and witness. If we couch this in 'oughts' and 'shoulds' may I suggest something needs to be examined. Why are we putting this on ourselves, bearing the heavy load? It may be from our upbringing, of obligation and expectation placed on us. I've thought of this being the eldest of four boys in our family - and setting an example and taking responsibility. Not that there isn't a place for obligation and expectation. Rather it's how we apply such. Rather than heavy obligation my seeking is for the 'Jesus-in-me' to be an example for others, in my service to him.

3) Perhaps there's also another aspect in our living, in *having a balance* in one's life, the most obvious in a balance of activity and stillness, in giving and receiving, time for others and time for self. Clearly in living the Christian way Jesus is not wanting to weigh us down and the yoke being ill-fitting and uncomfortable. A key personal verse in how to live is from Ephesians 2: 'We are what God has made us, created in Christ Jesus for good works, which God prepared beforehand to be our way of life. You may recognise this from a prayer 'that we may do the good works that you have prepared for us to walk in.' The 'key' then is to seek to discern how we serve Christ, in patterns and situations that present. From this we can also derive a benefit Jesus speaks of - 'take my yoke upon you...and *you will find rest for your souls.*' Or to paraphrase it 'feeling right about it, as we follow in Jesus' way.

4) Fourth and finally there's a verse I have noticed in the Acts of the Apostles that one can so easily miss, and it can help us in our regard for Christian living: '*Repent therefore, and turn to God, so that your sins may be wiped out, so that times of refreshing may come from the presence of the Lord.*' To paraphrase - as one follows in Jesus' way - that's the repentance aspect, know that you are forgiven, are freed to serve. Thus we can 'travel light' rather than be weighed down by heavy burdens of anxiety, or sin, or expectations - and be refreshed. For me it brings a sense of life and vitality in appreciation of life and living. That is 'living abundantly'. It is responding to Jesus' invitation, 'Come to me all who are heavy laden and I will give you rest.' When the New Testament paraphrase 'The Message' first came out one phrase really was, and is so alive - 'Learn the unforced rhythms of grace.' This is what Petersen was highlighting....quoting Jesus, 'keep company with me and you'll learn to live freely and lightly.'

So then we are together in this... Jesus and you each and me, in his willing service, not heavy or burdensome, as we share it together with him. Amen.