

A burden or a yoke?

Many years ago, Malcolm Fraser made the statement “Life wasn’t meant to be easy.”

It rings true, doesn’t it? Our experience is that life isn’t easy. Sometimes, it seems as if everything’s against us.

Except I think Malcolm Fraser was wrong.

Because as we read the bible, we certainly learn that life isn’t easy. But we also learn that it wasn’t meant to be that way.

Life was meant to be easy. But it turned out not to be... because we got in the way. Not just us here at St Ives, but all of us. As Paul wrote to the Romans “There is no one who is righteous, not even one... all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God” (Rom 3:10,23)

In turning away from God, in turning to our own ways, we made life hard. As it is put in Genesis 3 “cursed is the ground because of you; in toil you shall eat of it all the days of your life; thorns and thistles it shall bring forth for you;” (Gen 3:17-18).

Yes: Life is hard.

And that’s what we learn as we read through the Old Testament. Life is hard. The people complain. God sends help – which sometimes comes in the form of something bad – to bring the people back to him. Judges, prophets, kings, plagues, invasions, exiles and so on.

It’s a cycle we see happening time and time again as we read the scriptures. But it’s a cycle that ends with Jesus. The birth of Jesus in humble circumstances in Bethlehem over two thousand years ago wasn’t the end of life being hard, it wasn’t the end of suffering, but it was the beginning of the end.

Not everyone gets that distinction though... and of course many Christians struggle with the idea. Bad events are often thought to be God’s judgement. Many people claimed the 9/11 attacks were the result of the US turning away from God. Earlier still, AIDS was often claimed to be God’s judgment on people not following God’s commandments. The best part of seven hundred years ago, many people thought the same thing of the Black Death.

Yes, life is hard, but Jesus’ birth was beginning of the end. But we know that Jesus’ own life wasn’t easy. Jesus was one of us – and he experienced all the hardships of human life. Up to and including death. And in rising again, he conquered death... the firstborn from the dead as Paul writes to the Colossians.

But the end is not yet – and in the meantime, life remains hard. And there is no assurance that Christians will have an easier time of it than non-Christians. In fact, there is the assurance that life won’t be easy...

Jesus’ says in the Sermon on the Mount (Matt 5) “Blessed are you when people revile you and persecute you and utter all kinds of evil against you falsely on my account” and as we heard a few weeks ago, “If any want to become my followers, let them deny themselves and take up their cross and follow me.” (Matt 16:24)

And our experience reflects that, doesn’t it? And our experience also reflects that not everyone is prepared to accept Jesus – that many people either think that they can solve the problems of the world themselves, or that the world’s problems simply cannot be solved.

Jesus says in this morning's reading "To what can I compare this generation? They are like children sitting in the marketplaces and calling out to others: 'We played the pipe for you, and you did not dance; we sang a dirge, and you did not mourn.'" (11:16-17)

We played music, but you didn't respond. And then we were sad, and you didn't care. People didn't respond to a happy message, or an unhappy one.

People just didn't respond.

And then Jesus spells it out for his listeners:

For John came neither eating nor drinking, and they say, 'He has a demon.' (11:18)

John is John the Baptist... the one who was preaching baptism and repentance out in the wilderness by the Jordan. Famous for wearing a goat hair robe and a rope for a belt, and for living on a diet of locusts and wild honey.

People thought he was mad for living like that – Jesus tells us the people thought John was possessed by a demon!

But when Jesus came along and started preaching, he didn't live like John had – instead, Jesus ate and drank, and presumably had clothes better than a goat hair robe, and associated with 'the wrong kind of people' and people criticised that too - 'Here is a glutton and a drunkard, a friend of tax collectors and sinners'.

It's a lose/lose situation. If don't eat and drink you're mad or perhaps possessed, if you do, you're a glutton and a drunkard! People will always find fault... if they want to find fault. And if you want to ignore the message... well sometimes the easiest way to ignore a message is to discredit the messenger...

And then, having reflected on that hypocrisy, Jesus prays:

"I praise you, Father, Lord of heaven and earth, because you have hidden these things from the wise and learned, and revealed them to little children."

I think sometimes there's irony or even sarcasm in what Jesus says... but we Christians are often keen to take everything at face value, keen to take everything so seriously. "Father... you have hidden these things from the wise and learned, and revealed them to little children".

Really?

The wise and learned can't grasp what the little children can?

They might think they're wise and learned, they might even be wise and learned in the eyes of the world, but if they're missing their own double standards, and if they're missing the obvious, well then, how wise and learned can they really be? As the saying goes: perhaps they're too smart for their own good.

In verse 26 Jesus confirms that it is God's will – "Yes, Father, for this is what you were pleased to do." The gospel – the good news of Jesus is for everyone – not just the religious elite, not just the intelligentsia, not just for the nation of Israel – but it's good news for little children. If the little children can 'get it', then we all can, can't we?

Unless, like the 'wise and learned' that Jesus talks about, we choose not to.

Then Jesus affirms his special place in creation, in verse 27 he says “All things have been committed to me by my Father. No one knows the Son except the Father, and no one knows the Father except the Son and those to whom the Son chooses to reveal him.”

There is no one like Jesus. There is no one else who knows the Father he does. As Jesus says in John’s gospel, he is the way, the truth and the life. No one comes to the Father except through him. (John 14:6).

Today’s reading climaxes with verses 28-30, which is one of my favourite passages in all of scripture. Jesus says “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.” (11:28-30)

There’s an invitation.

There’s an assurance.

There’s an offer.

First, the invitation. Jesus says, “Come to me, all you who are weary and burdened”. Who’s weary and carrying heavy burdens? Maybe it’s easier to turn it around and ask “Well, who isn’t?”.

Life is hard, and life is hard work. It seems there’s never enough time to get done everything that we want to get done – let alone everything we should get done. So we push ourselves, we rush, we hurry, we might neglect things or cut corners. Traditionally, Sunday is a day of rest. And even if it is our most restful day, I wonder how many people don’t have at least a mental list of things they need to get done? They might be good things to do... but they’re things and they take time, but even when we’re having fun, it can be exhausting.

So Jesus invitation is to all of us. To all people. “Come to me” he says.

And then the assurance – “Come to me [...] and I will give you rest”. And rest is the solution. The solution to carrying heavy burdens – the burdens of life – is rest. That is what Jesus offers.

If we look back to those well-known words from the Old Testament “The Lord is my shepherd, I shall not want. He makes me lie down in green pastures; he leads me beside still waters; he restores my soul.” (Ps 23:1-3a)

And the Hebrew which is translated as “still waters”, is literally “waters of rest”

So we have the invitation, and then we have the assurance.

And then, finally the offer “Take my yoke upon you, and learn from me.”

We often think of a yoke as something that restrains... but that’s not what a yoke is intended to do.

When bullock’s are yoked into a team, the yoke isn’t there to control them – the bullocks are controlled by the driver – with words, by changing we’re he or she is standing relative to the beasts, and by tapping them with a stick or buggy whip.

The yoke isn’t a burden for the bullocks - rather, it’s a mechanism to harness their power. The yoke, rather than being a burden, is a tool. It helps get the job done.

You are probably also familiar with the lighter yoke, where some sort of pole is placed across the shoulders, with burdens hung on the ends. Again, the yoke itself is not a burden, instead, it's a tool which makes carrying burdens easier – you can carry a lot more with a such a yoke than without.

Thinking of the yoke Jesus talks about in this context, I'm reminded of his words to the rich young man later in Matthew's gospel, when the rich young man despairs of being able to be saved. "With man this is impossible," Jesus tells him "But with God all things are possible".

So when Jesus says take my "Take my yoke upon you and learn from me," he's saying take my way, it's easier. Jesus' way, rather than the ways of the world, make bearing life's burdens easier. And as well as taking on his yoke, he says we should learn from him. Listen to what he says, follow his commandments, live the way that he wants us to live. Because, he says, he is gentle and humble in heart.

And wouldn't it be great if we were all like that – gentle and humble in heart? Not just sometimes, but all the time. And that's how we find rest, the rest we all need.

That is Jesus offer – take his yoke, learn from him, and we will find rest for our souls.

Jesus' invitation, his assurance, and his offer are there for all of us. We have to decide for ourselves if we accept it. We can be like the wise and learned folks who choose not to accept it. We can think that rather than Jesus being the solution to the burdens of life, we can deal with those burdens ourselves.

Many people think that we can solve the world's problems by ourselves... and a few even try. But the scriptures... history.... and our own experience tells us that's not going to work.

So, it's a choice. A choice for us. A choice for all people.

There we have it: A burden, or a yoke?

Life was meant to be easy.... But it isn't.

Do we try to deal with the burdens of life ourselves... or do we take on Christ's yoke?

The invitation, the assurance and the offer are there for us.

If we turn to him, he will give us rest.

His yoke is easy, and his burden is light.

Amen.