

FOURTH SUNDAY AFTER PENTECOST – 6th July 2014 at Christ Church Cathedral

7.00am Eucharist 8.00am Eucharist 9.30am Solemn Eucharist

Readings: Genesis 24:34-38 42-49 58-67; Ps. 45:10-17; Romans 7:14-25; Matthew 11:15-19 (20-24) 25-30

In the 1662 BCP Communion Service after the Confession and Absolution the Priest says the “comfortable words” beginning with those of Jesus in today’s Gospel: “Come to me, all that are weary and are carrying heavy burdens, and I will give you rest” (Matthew 11:28). Who among us would not be drawn by Our Lord’s invitation to step aside from the busy and hectic pace of life with all its stresses and worries to unload our burdens and find the rest Jesus promises? Unrealistic demands at work or home, family tensions, and problems of all kinds drive us to seek the relief Jesus offers here.

Before we settle down and get too comfortable, let’s remember Jesus’ words in the previous chapter of Matthew’s Gospel, where he said if we want to be his disciples, his followers, we must deny self, take up our cross and follow him wherever he leads. “Those who find their life will lose it, and those who lose their life for my sake will find it” (Matt. 10:39). How do we reconcile Jesus calling us to bear our cross with coming to him to find rest by taking his yoke upon us which is easy and his burden which is light. A cross is neither easy nor light.

Another way of framing the question would be to ask, is being a Christian, a person of faith, a disciple of Jesus and a member of his Church a means to a life of fulfillment or a life of suffering. Or is it just that in the period between chapters 10 and 11 Jesus went to a sales seminar and learned that if you want to win followers you start by wooing them, not placing demands on them?

Taking up the cross is often thought of in terms of the expression “Well, we all have our cross to bear.” In other words, our ‘cross’ is putting up with interfering in-laws or inconsiderate neighbours who play loud music at midnight or mow their lawns while you’re trying to take a nap, or getting every red traffic light on the way out of Newcastle or even more serious burdens like caring for sick relative or a child who’s got into trouble with the law, or a debilitating illness?

Those are not the burdens or crosses Jesus is referring to here. Jesus has been critical of the religious burdens the scribes and Pharisees load onto the shoulders of the people. Throughout Matthew’s Gospel he’s seeking to correct that and warns us not to be like them. He offers as an alternative another way, namely himself. Popular wisdom seeks the way of striving to be religious, even those who would not consider themselves religious. The word ‘religion’ comes from a Latin word for binding or tying up. In that sense everyone is religious – we all have our forms of bondage and restriction. Jesus offers himself as another way that doesn’t weigh us down with heavy burdens of religious bondage.

In his letter to the Romans, in the chapter from which we read today, St Paul bewails his inability to do what he knew was right. “For I delight in the law of God in my inmost self, but I see another law at work in my members. Wretched man that I am! Who will rescue me from this body of death?” (Rom. 7:22-24). But he also recognises that, despite his inability to fulfill the requirements of the law, he has been brought close to God through Christ, because Christ is the one who saves us from ourselves and from death. So Paul finishes by bursting forth in praise: “Thanks be to God through Jesus Christ” (Rom. 7:25a).

So when we come to Jesus we can leave behind all religious striving and trying to please God by being righteous. Simple trust in him is all it takes. It's the way to peace and rest even in the midst of life's burdens. Even infants and children can receive this new life Christ brings – that's why we baptise babies. Now we hear Jesus burst forth in praise: “I thank you, Father, Lord of heaven and earth, because you have hidden these things from the wise and the intelligent and have revealed them to infants” (Matt. 11:25).

There may be times when we place burdens on our own shoulders. One of the most frequent ways people do that is not forgiving. Perhaps being unable to forgive others certainly, but mainly not being able or willing to forgive themselves. Self-condemnation can infect a person's whole life and being. Not long after I came to Newcastle I was called to one of the local hospitals to visit a lady who had a terminal illness but who couldn't stop crying. I asked her why she felt that way. She said she'd done so many bad things in her life, even to those who love her and stood beside her despite their being hurt by her. I said that's a beautiful example of how God is towards us – no matter what we've done, God doesn't leave us and yearns to forgive us.

She said she'd been telling God how sorry she was, but still couldn't feel God had forgiven her. I asked if she felt that perhaps the problem was that she couldn't forgive herself. She thought for a moment then agreed that, yes that was the case. She yearned for something that was impossible, viz., to go back and undo all the wrong things she'd done and get it right this time. I asked if she felt that were possible. She agreed it wasn't. The gospel and the Christian faith are grounded in reality, something the Rule of St Benedict emphasises. We can't go back and undo the past. We can repent, we can say we're sorry, we can make restitution if that's necessary. She said she'd been baptised in the Anglican Church, and she believed in the Lord, but hadn't been to church for a long time. So we prayed and I asked her to tell God what was on her heart in her own words. I then gave her absolution.

As I left the ward, instead of a frightened, tearful lady, there was a smiling and relaxed person sitting up in the hospital bed. She said she felt so much better. “Come to me all who you that are weary and carrying heavy burdens, and I will give you rest” (11:28).

Now of course this isn't only for those who are weighed down by heavy burdens of guilt. All of us need the rest and forgiveness Jesus promises us. None of us is worthy to receive Holy Communion. That's why we always confess our sins before we come to the Lord's Table. All of us avoid the crosses we're supposed to bear. We all fail to live up to our profession as Christians. All of us shun obedience in different ways. But thanks be to God, we can come regularly to his altar and be refreshed by the precious body and blood of his Son Jesus Christ.

The very word, 'communion' means being together with others. The Christian life can't be lived in isolation. We don't come to church just for our own private devotions. We worship and pray and live in community.

The rest Jesus promises isn't an absence of difficulties or shirking work and responsibility. Yokes are not soft couches of ease and comfort. They are implements of labour. Yet they make the work more comfortable, but only if two oxen are yoked together. The burden will only be light when each is connected to the other. As we live and work with others in the community of the Church, pulling together, the work is made light and easy. We need the support and encouragement of others.

One commentator points out that the Greek word for “easy” means “kind”. He says, “A good yoke is one that is carefully shaped so that there will be a minimum of chafing. Jesus’ yoke will be ‘kind’ to our shoulders, enabling us to carry the load more easily. In this sense alone his burden will be ‘light’. Jesus does not diminish the weight of our accountability to God but helps us bear this responsibility.”

Living lives of faithful discipleship is demanding and is becoming increasingly so. We can only remain faithful if we’ve known and if we regularly know through God’s word and sacraments the rest that Jesus promises. We’re called to do that with each other in the community of faith. That’s the only way to peace and security and fulfillment and deep joy.

Fr Mark Watson
Canon Pastor