

Sermon on Sunday 5 July 2020

by Rev. Alan Stewart

(Reading: Matthew 11. 16-19, 25-end)

Rest for the weary

It's Friday. It's five to five. It's... Crackerjack!!

For the uninitiated, or too young to remember, Crackerjack was a children's TV show back in the day, and was for many children the highlight of their week; including yours truly.

The best bit, always, was 'Double or Drop', where two children competed against each other, and prizes for correct answers were stacked into their arms. Cabbages were awarded for incorrect answers or dropped items; three cabbages and you were out.

Decades later I still, from time to time, feel like I'm playing 'Double or Drop', but without the fun and without the prizes. One thing after another seems to land in what feels like already overloaded arms, and sometimes, honestly, I just want to stop the world and get off.

I'm guessing I'm not the only one. And Lockdown, I think, has its own added pressures and stress.

We all carry all kinds of things – disappointments and regrets;

anxieties and responsibilities; loneliness, weariness. Add and delete as appropriate.

Let's stop there for a second and take a moment to ask yourself; what, in particular, am I carrying at this particular time? ...

... "Come to me, all of you who are weary and burdened by life, and I will give you rest".

How does it feel hearing those perhaps familiar words of Jesus? Are they comforting or just a bit hollow?

That much-needed rest we all crave often feels so much easier said than delivered.

Our minds are always racing, always rehearsing the 'what if's' or 'should be's'. That insider critic never tires of pointing its finger.

So often we feel ill-at-ease with ourselves; seldom are we at rest.

Some burdens are inevitable, of course, and some, actually, aren't ours to carry.

The audience Jesus was addressing would have known the all too real burdens of poverty and injustice and disease.

On top of that, they would have been weighed down by the obligations of a religion that required them not only to pay for the

privilege through a temple tax, but also to follow at least 900 sub-rules on top of an already strict and demanding ethical code.

It's no surprise then that Jesus devoted much of his life to lifting those unnecessary burdens.

I wonder if our burdens are made heavier because of our particular take on our particular religion. May it be that too often we feel the burden of 'thou shalt' or 'shalt not'? Maybe our religion is one that majors on guilt trips, or imposes an impossible perfectionism. Maybe it encourages shame. If that's true, and I think I'm speaking with Jesus here, then I'd encourage you to rethink and reboot; to unshackle that unnecessary burden that isn't yours to carry. And, for some of us, that will take some doing. Undoing what's hardwired into us takes time and grace.

As Barbara Brown Taylor writes, "I may believe that I live by God's grace, but I act like a scout collecting merit badges... I may believe that my life depends on God's grace, but I act like it depends on me and how many good deeds I can perform, as if every day were a talent show and God had nothing better to do than keep up with my score."

It's interesting that in this both comforting and challenging address we've just read, Jesus doesn't say 'give me your burdens'. Instead he says, "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."

A **yoke**, you might know, is a custom-made wooden crosspiece

that would have fitted across the shoulders of two beasts of burden in order to pull a plough or a cart. Now, yokes wouldn't be my go-to analogy here, but, actually, the more I think about it, the more helpful I think it is. You see, I used to think that what Jesus meant was that he was the ploughman and we just needed to submit to his orders and we'd always be travelling in the right direction. I now realise that Jesus isn't the farmer, he's the yoke-partner. Jesus shares our yoke. And he asks actually to take the bulk of the weight; to bind himself to us and pull together on that path marked freedom. You see, contrary to popular opinion, freedom is never found in 'my will be done', but only in 'Thy will'. Freedom is found in submitting our wills to his. Only then, do we begin to become who we were made to be.

Often one of the biggest burdens we carry is our desire to be independent and self-sufficient; that belief that we don't really need any help to get through life, thank you very much; that asking for help, in fact, is weakness. So we try to carry everything solo, try to pull the plough ourselves. And, I have to admit, that's my default position, until I get so exhausted or disillusioned I have to confess to myself and God that I need him to share the load, to get me back on the road marked freedom.

We share the load by sharing the thoughts and the feelings that weigh us down or consume us; we talk it through with God and with others. When we internalize our burdens, they grow heavier. When we speak them out, they begin to lose power; we begin to find another perspective.

We will always give our lives to; yoke ourselves to something. And most of the promises out there don't deliver; they're empty; they

lead in circles. When we choose, however, to yoke ourselves to Christ, to co-labor with him, together we travel through territory worthy of the word 'life'.

Jesus doesn't promise to remove our burdens, but he does promise to help carry them. He doesn't promise to fix our problems, but he does promise to help shoulder their weight. All he asks is that we let go of what is unnecessary and unworthy (be that a scorekeeping faith, or the sins of comparison or self-sufficiency); to partner with him, to let him take the strain, to yoke ourselves to the one who is gentle and humble in heart; so that together we move forward on that road marked life; that furrow marked freedom.

So today, may you know which burdens are yours to carry and which are not. May you find a new direction as you yoke yourself with him. May you find a new strength as you let him share the weight you carry. Today, may you know rest.

