

Message for June 28, 2020

Matthew 11:25-30

The Bible tells us that before Jesus began his public ministry he was a carpenter in the village of Nazareth. Carpenters back then were jacks-of-all-trades and made all sorts of things including furniture, household items and even farm equipment such as the yokes for the oxen. All of the yokes had to be custom made since the animals were of all different shapes and sizes. First of all the animal would be taken to the workshop where it would be carefully measured. The yoke was made and the ox would be brought back a second time to try it on. Then the yoke was very carefully adjusted so that it would fit well; after all if the yoke rubbed the ox's neck raw then the animal would be rendered useless.

According to an old story, Jesus was the best yoke-maker in all of Galilee and back then, just like now, most shops hung advertising signs outside to attract the attention of the passersby. It is said that the sign outside of Jesus' shop read "My yokes rest easy". Later on then when Jesus was a preacher, it was only natural that he referred to his former advertising slogan when he called upon the people to come to him.

When Jesus issued this great invitation he was in the middle of a dispute with his religious opponents, the Pharisees. The Pharisees insisted that the religious laws and traditions were all important as it was only by obeying them that God could be both known and pleased. The intent was good but by Jesus' day the Pharisees had come up with hundreds of rules and regulations that governed virtually every aspect of daily behaviour including such as what food could be eaten, how far you could travel on the Sabbath and how a person was supposed to wash his or her hands. Truly by Jesus' day the law had become a heavy yoke around the necks of many people, a burden that was weighing them down and rubbing them raw.

This was the situation when Jesus issued his great invitation: "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." In other words, "Come to me, all

you who find the law and its demands such a burden. Put your trust in me and you will find peace for your souls.” Now this of course was pretty revolutionary and it’s certainly no wonder that by saying this Jesus got into trouble with the religious authorities. Jesus’ invitation however was very popular back then and it hasn’t lost any of its appeal since; turn to Jesus and put your faith and trust in him. If you do so you will be at peace with both yourself and the world around you. Behind this deceptively simple invitation though lies three things; an assumption, a command and a promise. The assumption of course is that we are in fact burdened or heavy laden. Is this a valid assumption?

For many if not all of us, the answer is surely ‘yes’. To be sure, we are not overburdened by the yoke of the religious law with its heavy if not impossible demands but how many other yokes do we have to carry? The yoke of problems at work? The yoke of problems at home? The yoke of our own less than perfect health or that of someone close to us? There is certainly the yoke of the times that we are now living through. Even as things begin to return to some sense of normalcy, things aren’t really normal. The pandemic with all of its upsets, impositions and the resulting implications may well feel like a heavy burden to be endured. Truly there are so many different kinds of yokes and they come in all sorts of different shapes and sizes too. Whatever form they take though, they leave us feeling weary, overburdened and sometimes even overwhelmed. Whenever we may feel this way though, we are commanded to do something. We are commanded to turn our burdens over to Jesus but while this may sound easy enough, this is sometimes far easier said than done.

To turn to Christ means that we have faith in him and that we believe that he can and will help us. Turning to Jesus also means that we are willing to commit everything to him without fear or reservation; all our hopes and fears. Instead of worrying and clutching onto our burdens, we are to share our burdens with Jesus and then simply let them go. In effect we say, “Here, I have done my best, I’m tired of worrying about it and now it’s all up to you.”

This can sound so easy and appealing but in practice it can be so hard to do. Too often perhaps we hang onto our burdens, worries and fretting, thinking that we must or ought to be saying or doing something! Nevertheless if we've done all that we can, want peace and to be relieved, then this is what we are commanded to do; to simply pass it over. We are certainly not to act as Douglas Corrigan did.

Back in 1938 a pilot by the name of Douglas Corrigan took off from Brooklyn, New York with his destination being Long Beach, California. A little over twenty-three hours later he touched down in Dublin Ireland and asked the officials: "Is this Long Beach?" His exploit earned him the nickname 'Wrong-way Corrigan' and this became his claim to fame. Corrigan in fact became a celebrity of sorts; imagine leaving for California and ending up in Ireland! How could anyone fly across the Atlantic Ocean instead of the United States and not realize it? The answer was obvious; that his trip across the Atlantic had been carefully planned all along, that he had made the flight 'by accident, but on purpose'.

By accident, but on purpose. There are times in life when we too go the wrong way on purpose and then wonder why we are in such a predicament. We say that we are turning everything over to Christ but we don't and then wonder why we don't experience his promised peace and relief. If we want his promised rest and peace then we have to turn to Christ with no holding back. Only then will the promise be fulfilled; not that he *may* give us rest, not that he *might* give us rest but rather that he *will* give us rest. And how does Jesus fulfill this wonderful promise?

In many different ways. He may for example simply rid us of our problem. That troubling ailment or unresolved issue may simply disappear or take care of itself. But while God can and indeed does sometimes make our troubles go away, I believe that more often than not he does something else; he gives us the strength to cope and persevere. Many of us can look back at our lives and remember those times when we had to do something or undergo something that we thought we never could. We felt that we weren't strong enough or brave enough but then, with God's help and that of our families, friends or perhaps even complete strangers, we did it. God

was helping us, even if we didn't realize it. So often in life we want the obvious and the spectacular but, as I have said many times before, this generally isn't how God works. More often than not God works so quietly that we only realize his presence and working in our lives years later. Only when we look back do we realize that what seemed to be incredibly good luck or a marvelous coincidence was really something else altogether. And this is how Christ more often than not answers those who accept his great invitation. Perhaps this may help illustrate this.

Many years ago a contest was held in which artists were invited to paint a picture that depicted perfect peace. Two paintings made it to the finals. The first depicted a quiet mountain scene; it looked so peaceful and tranquil. The second painting depicted a thundering waterfall with the branches of a birch tree bent over in the foam. On the fork of one limb however sat a robin on its nest, all unperturbed. The first painting certainly spoke of tranquility but the second painting won the prize because it showed the peace that may be found in the most turbulent of surroundings. And as it was in that painting, so it is in life with Christ.

Most of the time Christ doesn't grant us his peace by making the turbulence disappear. Instead he gives us his peace and rest by giving us the strength to cope amidst all the turbulence and he does this by working through the events and the people around us. This is how he, more often than not, fulfills his great invitation and promise: "Come to me all you who labour and are heavy-laden and I will give you rest." And so he does.