

**6<sup>th</sup> July 2014**  
**St Barnabas, E17.**  
**Theme: Burdens**

**"Come to me, all you that are weary and are carrying heavy burdens, 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."**

**I have a question for you this morning? I ask it of you and I am asking it of myself too. And the question is this: what is weighing you down? What is causing you stress? What feels like a burden? What makes you feel that you are enslaved, not free? What is weighing you down?**

**Are you feeling weighed down by troubles? Weighed down by worries over your job, over money, over studies, over your future direction, over things to do in the house or things to do elsewhere? What is weighing you down?**

**Are you feeling burdened by family matters? By strain in your relationship with your spouse, your partner, your boyfriend, your girlfriend? Are you weighed down by relations with your friends, neighbours, work colleagues? Are you weighed down by your concern for a loved one who is troubled in mind, or without direction, or under the influence of addiction, or a loved one who is ill or is dying? What is weighing you down?**

**Are you weighed down by loss? Loss of your job, loss of opportunity, loss of face, loss of a loved one? What is weighing you down? Are you weighed down by oppression? Feeling enslaved by an oppressive boss or colleague? Not feeling free because of an oppressive partner, or parent or child?**

**Well, whatever is weighing us down today, Jesus has a message for us and this is it: "Come to me, all you that are weary and are carrying heavy burdens, 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."**

**Take my yoke upon you? What on earth does that mean? Some of you may be familiar with agricultural terminology but I am not, so I had to look it up! And here is what I discovered. A yoke is basically a long piece of wood and in Jesus' day it was most often placed across two oxen as they were ploughing a field or carrying a heavy load, so that they would be bound together, to work together. Imagine if you can that piece of wood across the back of the necks of the oxen, forcing their heads down, pressing upon them as they pulled a plough or carried a heavy load. No wonder the yoke is used in the Bible as an image of oppression, an image of slavery. In Galatians chapter 5, verse 1 we read, "It is for freedom that Christ has set us free. Stand firm, and do not let yourselves be burdened again by the yoke of slavery."**

**And of course the yoke has been used throughout history as a means of binding slaves together. I guess many of us might be familiar with those images of slaves bound together by yokes, by long pieces of wood over their shoulders, just one of the many hideously cruel forms of restraint used against people forced into slavery, as they, like oxen, were forced to plod on in drudgery weighed down with the burden of their captivity.**

**Are you weighed down by others? One of my favourite speeches is the speech that Martin Luther King Jnr gave**

in Harlem upon his return from Oslo to receive the Nobel Peace Prize. In Harlem he said, 'I do not speak as one who has never know the burdens of life.' He talked about how he had faced so much opposition, "jostled by the chilly winds of adversity", how he had received threats on his life. And he talks about how he struggled on motivated by the cause, motivated by those who need hope, by those who need to find a way out, by those in need of freedom from oppression. This is the burden on any one who stands up for justice. I have experience in some part myself and it isn't nice when people revile you and slander you... it is too big a burden to bear on your own.

Are you weighed down by yourself? By your inability to do what you would like to do because somehow you seem enslaved to yourself? You want not to do something and you find yourself doing it. Or you want to do something and you find yourself not doing it. If so, you are in good company for this is precisely what St Paul is talking about in his letter to the Romans. He says, "I do not understand my own actions. For I do not do what I want, but I do the very thing I hate" and he says, "For I do not do the good I want, but the evil I do not want is what I do." Paul accounts for this by the sin that dwells within him and that this sin is somehow at war within himself with his own inner sense of the law of God. He knows within himself what it is right to do or not do, but he has within himself another force at work, the law of sin, battling within and leading him to do that which is wrong. I have in mind that image from cartoons or comedy shows, where someone is contemplating an action, and over one shoulder is that person as an angel telling her to do one thing, and over the other shoulder the same person as a devil telling her to do the opposite. Paul describes just such an inner dynamic, 'For I delight

**in the law of God in my inmost self, but I see in my members another law at war with the law of my mind, making me captive to the law of sin that dwells in my members. Wretched man that I am!’ Wretched it feels indeed to be weighed down by such an inner sense of not being free to be the person we would like to be because somehow we keep doing the opposite of what we really want do to. Paul talks of this as a kind of slavery. We are enslaved to the tendency towards sin within ourselves but help is at hand. ‘Who will rescue me from this body of death?’, he asks, and replied to himself, ‘Thanks be to God through Jesus Christ our Lord!’ It is through Jesus that we are set free, through Jesus that we the burden of sin is lifted from us, through Jesus that we are given relief from all that is weighing us down.**

**The image that Jesus gives us is not of removing the yoke, not of taking our burdens away, but of us being yoked to him, so that our burdens are eased, so that the pressure of all that is weighing us down is lifted by walking alongside him. Jesus was also familiar with the agricultural practice of breaking in a young ox by yoking it, attaching it to an older, stronger ox. The younger ox would be walking alongside the older one learning from it, lightly yoked to it, as the older one would bear the weight of the plough or other heavy load. Hence the yoke for the younger ox would be easy, its burden would be light as it learned from the older ox.**

**Our first reading this morning reminds us that it is not only individuals who are weighed down but peoples also. The Israelites were weighed down by their experiences of captivity and slavery throughout much of their history. Zechariah writes in the period following the exile in Babylon, in the period when the Jews were returning to and rebuilding Jerusalem. Scholars believe that when he**

**says, God will set their ‘prisoners free from the waterless pit’, that the waterless pit is a reference to Babylon. In any case, these prisoners of hope, or prisoners who wait in hope, as some translations put it, these prisoners of hope are rescued. Zechariah uses the image of a king riding to rescue them on a donkey, the same image Jesus drew upon this image when we rode a donkey into Jerusalem some five hundred years later, when he proclaimed freedom to the Israelites who were then living under the oppressive rule of the Roman empire, and went further by proclaiming freedom to the whole of human kind by showing that the ways of peace and not the ways of violence would be key to the reign of God.**

**In any country today, among any people today, among the Palestinians oppressed in East Jerusalem today, among the Syrians, Iraqis, Ukrainians, Sudanese and others caught up in political violence, among millions crying out in hunger, among the fifty million displaced refugees of our world today, many literally imprisoned in refugee camps, among all imprisoned by the injustice of our world, there is the challenge to us to stand with them as prisoners who wait in hope and to let Jesus share the weight as we work for peace and justice in our world. It is Jesus who has already borne the burden of our sin on the cross, Jesus who has already shown us how to love and share with one another, Jesus who has already shown us that the future lies not in violence but in peace, Jesus who offers freedom not only for us as individuals but for the whole world.**

**Jesus’ offer, Jesus’ promise is there...the challenge for us is to respond. "Come to me, all you that are weary and are carrying heavy burdens, and I will give you rest. Take my yoke upon you, and learn from me... ." "Come to me...": we have to make the move towards Jesus, if he is**

**to give us rest. "Take my yoke...": we have to put the yoke upon us freely if we are to be bound with Jesus. It is our choice to walk alongside him, to learn from him, not in submission with a co-slave, but in trust with one we can call friend and brother. This is not a release from our burdens, this is not an escape from a troubles, this is not a retreat from working for justice and peace. This is an invitation to feel our burdens eased, to feel some of the weight lifted, as we patiently plod on, side by side with Jesus, as we walk along and learn from Jesus so that we might receive from him inspiration, guidance, support, wisdom and above all the love of Jesus to see us through and keep us on the right path. We may not be given much rest for our bodies, the pains, the challenges, the troubles remain, but we are given rest for our souls, the comfort of knowing that we do not struggle alone and that we struggle guided by the wisdom and love of God.**

**What is causing you stress? What feels like a burden? What makes you feel that you are enslaved, not free? What is weighing you down? Whatever it is or whatever number of things it is...the offer is there, the offer of rest, the offer to learn from Jesus, the offer to encounter the one who is gentle and humble in heart, the one who gives us rest for our souls, the one whose yoke is easy, and whose burden is light.**

**Steven Saxby, July 2014.**