

Sermon for All Around the Altar Service - Sunday, 5th July

Revd Andrea Ward

Reflection Time / Introduction of theme

I wonder how many of you like going on walks? I wonder how many of you like going on *long* walks? I wonder how many of you like going on long walks *up mountains*???

My husband, Pete, loves long walks up mountains (PHOTO) particularly in the Lake District. He loves the views when he gets to the top. I love the views as well, but I have to confess that I don't enjoy the long walk getting *up* the mountain. There's usually a bit of moaning that goes on during that bit - and of course, on the way up, you've got all your full bottles of water and your food supplies in your back-pack to carry with you (it would be much easier if you were doing the walk the other way round and going downhill first!)

When you've got something heavy on your back, it makes a huge difference to how easy it is to carry, depending on how well-fitted your rucksack is!

Example - big baggy rucksack with no straps around your middle; the design means a heavy load pulls me back.

Walking rucksack - frame, straps etc mean it fits comfortably and the weight is evenly distributed, so it doesn't feel like you're constantly being pulled back. It's well-fitted. It makes walking up that mountain a lot easier than it would be if I was wearing an uncomfortable, badly fitted rucksack like this one. And the views you get once you're up on top of the mountain make it all worthwhile!

Jesus, when he was talking about what it was like to follow him, once used an illustration a little bit like our well-fitted rucksack. We're going to find out what Jesus had to say, and Kirstie's going to read to us from Matthew's gospel.

Bible reading - Matthew 11:25-30

TALK

'Come to me, all you who are weary and burdened, and I will give you rest. ²⁹ 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. ³⁰ For my yoke is easy and my burden is light.'

These are such well-known words of Jesus! And those first words, 'Come to me, all you who are weary and burdened, and I will give you rest' have brought such comfort to so many people, particularly at times when we're feeling like we're weighed down with worries, and problems, and difficulties. Jesus invites us to seek him and to find comfort and rest in him, the one who loves us and cares for us.

But actually, Jesus wasn't just talking about us finding rest in him when we are tired because of the difficult things that can happen in our lives or when we feel weary from the everyday pressures of life. He was talking about what it would be like to follow him.

There was a problem in Jesus's day with "religion". As Jesus had listened to ordinary people, and as he'd listened to and watched the religious leaders of his day, he'd seen there was a big problem.

And this was the problem: following God for his fellow Jews had become like a hard slog up a mountain with a far too heavy, badly fitted bag on your back. And you never got to the top to see those beautiful views. Because following God had become all about the law and the religious rules and regulations that you had to obey and fulfill in order to please God and to come up to scratch. And Jesus had seen that people were exhausted and couldn't keep it all up, and of course, they never came up to scratch. The long slog with the far too heavy, badly fitted bag just went on and on.

In Matthew 23:4, Jesus talked to people about the religious leaders of his day, the scribes and Pharisees as "those who tie up heavy loads and put them on men's shoulders." Following God had been made into a joyless burden for people.

Of course, there's nothing wrong with rules in themselves. Following rules, though hard, *can* be really important and can help us. Think for a moment about some of the rules you've had to follow during the last 3 months with the coronavirus pandemic. It's not been easy, but we know that following those rules have helped reduce the spread of the virus and saved lives. And actually, following rules can actually lead to us being able to enjoy ourselves more! Liverpool FC has just won the Premier League. And to do so, the players had to follow the rules of the game of football. For anyone playing football or any other sport, obeying the rules actually liberates the players to enjoy the game and play with purpose.

But that's very different to all the religious rules of Jesus's day, which left people feeling weary, and certainly not enjoying following God. And into all of this Jesus says,

'Come to me, all you who are weary and burdened, and I will give you rest. ²⁹ 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. ³⁰ For my yoke is easy and my burden is light.'

As Bible commentator, Robert Mounce says, "It is to those who would approach God in the simplicity of personal trust that Jesus promises rest."

We don't have to constantly try and follow lots of rules and regulations to make sure we're good enough for God, because Jesus has led the good-enough life for us; Jesus has already done the work of carrying the heavy burden, the cross, for us (PICTURE), so that now we are free to receive God's forgiveness, free to enjoy knowing that we are totally accepted and loved by God - through faith and trust in Jesus and his life, death and resurrection. This is so different, so liberating, so freeing! It's about trusting in and learning from Jesus, who in his own words, is gentle and humble. What a relief!

Does that mean that we can all lounge around like couch potatoes and do nothing?

Of course not! Being a follower of Jesus involves learning loving obedience to him; it involves action and service for his kingdom work, and can be demanding! But just because something is demanding doesn't mean it's a burden. Coming back to our example of football, training (skills, fitness etc) to be a half-decent footballer can be very demanding but the outcome is a footballer who will enjoy the game and be able to make the most of their ability; or let's think of playing a musical instrument - it takes hours of

practice to play an instrument well, but demanding as that may be, it leads to far greater enjoyment that comes from being able to produce a beautiful sound!

Trying to fulfill the impossible demands of being good enough for God never leads to feeling rested. But because of who Jesus is, humble and gentle, responding to the demands that come with following *him* brings rest and fulfilment for our souls.

Jesus 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. ³⁰ For my yoke is easy and my burden is light.”

I wonder what comes to mind when you think of a yoke? The kind of yoke Jesus is talking about was a hand-carved wooden frame that was fastened over the neck of an animal and attached to the plough or cart that they were to pull. In Bible times, animals (usually oxen/cattle) often worked in pairs with a yoke fastened across them, so they shared the load. Yokes are still used to day in many countries for agriculture (see if you can find some pictures on the internet, later on).

Perhaps we might think that’s a rather odd image for Jesus to use about following him?

But actually yokes aren’t bad things. A bit like my rucksack, a well-fitted yoke helps to make work easier. (Again, on the internet, you can find pictures of people using a yoke to help them evenly balance and carry buckets of water and heavy loads). A well-fitted yoke helps make their job easier.

So, Jesus is telling us that instead of the heavy loads of laws and rules that the Jewish leaders had put on people’s shoulders that bent them over double, following him is like carrying a light burden with the help of a really well fitted, easy yoke.

Perhaps, as we think of those oxen working together with their shared yoke, we might also imagine sharing our yoke with Jesus. And particularly as we think about the rest that Jesus does also want to give us when we’re tired and weary, how much easier it is for us to bear our burdens and troubles if we share them with him, as he pulls the load together with us, side by side.

‘Come to me, all you who are weary and burdened, and I will give you rest. ²⁹ 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. ³⁰ For my yoke is easy and my burden is light.’

Jesus offers us a wonderful invitation. If you’ve not accepted his invitation yet, perhaps today is your time to say “yes” to him? Perhaps you’ve accepted Jesus’s yoke, but are aware that you’ve been putting on other yokes again, trying to come up to scratch for God. It’s time to take those yokes off. Perhaps today you’re feeling tired and weary because of difficult things you’re having to deal with; Jesus encourages you to keep sharing those with him so that he can stand by your side and help you pull the load.

Jesus says, “Come to me”.