



Service for Personal or Private Use Sunday 5th July 2020

Jesus said, "Come to me, all who labour and are heavy laden, and I will give you rest. Take my yoke upon you, and learn from me, for I am gentle and lowly in heart, and you will find rest for your souls. For my yoke is easy and my burden is light." (Matthew 11 v 28-30)

What burdens have you been carrying recently? It may be fear or anxiety; it may be concerns for your own health, or of someone close to you; it may be uncertainty about how the Covid pandemic will be resolved, or about some significant event in your own future. Guilt and shame may burden others. There is no disqualification; there is an open invitation and a true welcome – if we will come to Jesus now. And that is what we do as we pray and as we worship.

Hymn: *O worship the Lord in the beauty of holiness* (H&P 505, StF 34, MP 529)

Prayer:

Heavenly Father, loving and gracious God, I join with Christian friends of many churches to worship you. The invitation of the Lord Jesus tells me I can draw close to you without fear, without the risk that I shall be refused.

I worship you as the holy God, the God of perfect justice that is never compromised and of perfect goodness that is never exhausted.

I worship you as the God of wisdom, whose words are true and whose ways are right.

I worship you as the God of love, whose care for your children is ever alert and for ever seeking to draw us closer to yourself.

I worship you as the God of power, who brought the universe into being by your command and who upholds it still by your will; whose strength is made perfect in our weakness and whose help is given to all who seek.

I worship you as the God of mercy, who gave your only Son to suffer and die to take away our sins, and to rise again to give new life to all who trust in him.

I worship you as the God of my life, who has been with me all my days and who has said, "I will never fail you nor forsake you."

Accept the praise I bring, and "Kindle a flame of sacred love on the mean altar of my heart."
Amen.

Boundless, O God, is your saving power;
your harvest reaches to the ends of the earth.

Set our hearts on fire for your kingdom
and put on our lips the good news of peace.

Grant us perseverance as heralds of your Gospel
and joy as disciples of your Son Jesus Christ our Lord;
who lives and reigns with you in the unity of the Holy Spirit,
one God for ever and ever. Amen.

Bible Reading – Psalm 145 verse 8 to 14 (Read the whole of the Psalm if you want!)

Each verse of this Psalm begins with consecutive letters of the Hebrew alphabet. It is an A to Z of trust in God. *Pause after reading each verse. How does it speak to you about trusting God? Commit one of the verses to memory, and keep reminding yourself of it all through this week.*

Hymn: *O love that will not let me go* (H&P 685, StF 636, MP 515)

Bible Reading – Matthew 11 verses 16 to 30

“Come to me...” - these words of Jesus must have been used thousands, millions of times as the text for evangelistic sermons and addresses, and doubtless many people during the last 2000 years have responded to that invitation. Not for a moment would I want to question that use of the Lord’s words – though I might hesitate to endorse the suggestion that if you come to Jesus all your troubles are over and your life will be brim-full of happiness and peace. Neither would I want to limit the scope of the invitation: when he said all he meant all, everybody. If you remember the old version of the Communion Service you will remember this verse as one of the ‘Comfortable Words,’ those reassurances that the gospel hope is extended to everyone who will accept the gift of God. The instinct was correct that saw these words as having a wider application than just offering sinners pardon and new life – true blessing though that is. Look who are addressed:

The unresponsive and the killjoys verses 16-17

How fickle people can be! John the Baptist turns up with his challenging call to repent in readiness for God’s kingdom. Some say ‘Yes’ but most object. Too severe. Too austere. Sucks all the joy out of life. It was said of one politician that he ‘looked as if he had been weaned on a lemon.’

Then Jesus turns up, obviously at ease with “tax collectors and sinners.” Time for a fit of the vapours! That’s not how religious people behave, especially prophets (or Messiahs, come to that). Is this what “life in all its fullness” looks like? Is this what happens when the springs of living water burst the banks, and God’s Spirit liberates people? And once again the critics let rip.

No wonder Jesus compares them to grumpy children refusing to join their mates in games, whether dances or funerals. It’s like that instructive story in 2nd Samuel chapter 6, as the Ark of the Covenant is being brought to Jerusalem. At one point Uzzah, in an act of great irreverence, puts out his hand to the sacred Ark; and dies. Later, Michal, David’s wife, sees him dancing and rejoicing before God and the Ark; she despises him. It’s as if they want their religion either stuffy or flippant, irreverent or boring. Both are wrong.

If your religion is tired and worn out, isn’t it time to “Come to Jesus” for him to refresh you?

These people had put up their “Do Not Disturb” signs. They would not seek God’s Kingdom in the repentance that John preached, and they would not find the Kingdom in Jesus who invited them. He was not ashamed to be called a Friend of sinners – he “came into the world to save sinners” as Paul wrote to Timothy. Sinners find a friend who helps them move to holiness. If I go to the garage when my car isn’t working properly I will praise the mechanic who puts it right, but not the one who tells me that the noise and smoke are nothing to worry about. And I praise a Saviour who can change this sinner, and not leave me as I am.

The stubborn refusers verses 20-24

You have met people who say that they will believe in God if they see some miraculous sign: we all have. And when you tell them of what he has done in your life, they want more proof. You point them to the wonders of God’s creation, and they dismiss that. You tell them of the Resurrection, and that won’t do either. The truth is that they don’t want to believe. G K Chesterton summed them up: Christianity has not been tried and found wanting; it has been found difficult and not tried.

Here were towns that had been eye-witnesses of many of Jesus’s miracles. They had seen lame people walk, blind people’s sight restored, the hungry fed, the freeing of those held captive by evil; they had even seen the dead raised to life. What more could they need? Every sign they could want was there before them.

There were the signs that confirmed the claims that Jesus made. It was at Capernaum that the paralysed man had been lowered through the roof on his stretcher, and Jesus – instead of telling him to get up and walk – had told him that his sins were forgiven. Easy to say that: by the time we can put it to the test it will be too late. That's when Jesus made his big claim, his evidence that he did have that authority. That was the moment when he told the man to rise and walk – and he did. Yes, Jesus has that authority, and the signs confirm it.

There were the signs that showed what God's coming Kingdom is like. That was why the sick were healed and the hungry were fed and the bruised and battered and broken were made whole. That's why those trapped by forces of evil were set free. That's why the outcasts of society found a welcome that nobody else would give them. It's why the church today is a hospital for sinners and not a museum for saints.

No wonder Jesus rebuked those towns so strongly. They had the evidence and refused to believe. They needed to come to him, to find rest for their souls. It isn't explanations and arguments and evidence that people need: it's the willingness to come to Jesus.

The weary verses 28-30

These people are not to be blamed, unlike those earlier. These are the ones who feel their need and have the humble simplicity to accept the help. Jesus doesn't say to them that their problems don't matter, or that everything will work out in the end. He takes them seriously because they take his promise seriously. The psalmist wrote, "Cast your burden on the Lord and he will sustain you," and Peter in his first letter wrote, "Cast all your cares on him, because he cares for you." (Psalm 55 v22 and 1st Peter 5 v7) "Come to me. Take my yoke upon you," says Jesus.

They may be weary from carrying burdens of

- Past failure, guilt, sin, shame, broken relationships;
- The anxious care that gnaws away like an obsession, and leaves no peace;
- The weight of responsibility, of knowing that 'the buck stops here' and feeling unable to handle all that may be thrown at you;
- Major decisions that must be made, when the consequences are so great;
- Fear of an unknown situation, or of the outcome you are powerless to control;
- Uncertainty about the future.

And these are typical of the burdens so many people carry. Jesus does not dismiss the fear or the burden. He asks that we share it with him: to take his yoke is to become like a team of oxen ploughing, who wear the double yoke. The burden is taken by the strong one.

Dr Campbell Morgan began a sermon with Paul's words in Philippians 4 v13, "I can do all things." 'Do you mean that, Paul? I'm willing to bet you half a crown...' And then he read it all. "I can do all things *through Christ who strengthens me.*" 'That's different,' he said, putting the coin back in his pocket.

We do not ask for tasks matched to our strength, but for strength sufficient for the tasks and duties set before us. In Deuteronomy 33 v25 it says, "As your days, so shall your strength be," and not the other way round.

William Barclay captures a truth in the fanciful suggestion that Jesus could have hung up a sign by the carpenter's shop, reading 'My Yokes Are Easy.'

What burdens do you need to share with Jesus? What weighs you down unnecessarily?

Prayer

Imagine that Jesus is sitting in the chair opposite you. Notice the warmth in his eyes and the tenderness in his voice as he asks what is your burden at the moment. It may not be the one you had yesterday, or last week. Think before you tell him. Listen as he tells you to take the yoke that lightens your load and makes it bearable. Now you are ready to pray.

Loving Lord, I am not unique in having burdens and cares. I have tried to be honest with you about all that troubles me and wears me down. I bring to you the cares of others in their need.

The Covid crisis dominates the headlines, and it is right that I pray about it. I pray for those who are suffering from the virus, and for their families. I pray for the doctors and nurses who are caring for them, often at great risk to their own health. I pray for the researchers and pharmacists in their search for reliable tests and effective treatment and vaccine. I pray for other patients whose treatment has been delayed because of the pressures on hospitals.

I pray about the issues raised by the Black Lives Matter protests. I pray for those who suffer from discrimination and prejudice, and I pray for those who lack the sensitivity to recognize the problem. I pray for those who are made to feel unwelcome – sometimes even in our churches. I pray for those who challenge the injustices and for those who are attempting to build the bridges.

I pray for the people whose jobs are insecure, or have already ended. I pray for them and for their families. I pray for school-leavers and recent graduates as they enter the jobs market. I pray for the Government and their advisers as they wrestle with decisions about responding to the great and complex needs that affect us all – may they have wisdom, sensitivity and courage.

I pray for the crises that have stopped being news; for the millions of refugees and displaced persons; for the starving; for the victims of persecution, especially my Christian brothers and sisters. I pray for my church and its members, as we look for ways of sharing worship and fellowship again. I pray for those who will have to continue taking precautions and isolate, that they won't be neglected or feel unloved.

I pray for my family, who share so much with me. May they share the blessings I seek and the faith that means so much to me.

I bring my prayers in the name of Jesus Christ my Lord. Amen.

The Lord's Prayer

Hymn: *I heard the voice of Jesus say...* (H&P 136, StF 248, MP 275)

The Grace of our Lord Jesus Christ,
the love of God,
and the fellowship of the Holy Spirit,
be with us all evermore.

Amen.