

## **Come to me, and I will give you rest.**

*A sermon preached in Christ Church, Aspen, by the Rev. Bruce McNab.*

*7<sup>th</sup> Sunday after Pentecost. Proper 9, Year A. July 3, 2005, 8:00 am. (Text: Matthew: 11:25-30)*

Our usual 8:00 service here is the Holy Eucharist, Rite One. Part of that service – just as in earlier Books of Common Prayer all the way back to the very first one in 1549 – is a section that used to be called “the Comfortable Words.” It comes right after the Confession and Absolution, and it’s a collection of verses from various places in the New Testament. It starts off with a verse from the gospel for today – but in King James Version language. “*Come to me, all ye that travail and are heavy laden, and I will refresh you.*” ...Or, as our modern Bible translation puts it, “*Come to me, all you that are weary and are carrying heavy burdens, and I will give you rest.*”

I wonder how many of us here this morning have a sense of being “weighed down” by circumstances in our lives. Jesus spoke these words originally to townspeople and peasants in Galilee who had a variety of different burdens to bear. First, they had the daily burden of survival in a subsistence economy. Famine was always just around the corner, and nobody except the very rich could be sure that they’d always have enough to eat. Many of them worked on large estates, owned by foreigners; their economic future was always insecure. They lived under the heel of Roman conquerors who imposed heavy taxes and whose soldiers could require forced labor from them without prior notice. —In addition, they went to the synagogue on the Sabbath and heard the Pharisees and Scribes urging them to be more zealous and meticulous in keeping all the requirements of the Jewish Law – observances that were commonly described, even by the Pharisees themselves, as a “yoke,” the “yoke of the Law.” This portrayed the practice of religion itself as a kind of burdensome servitude.

The people Jesus taught and touched were people who – for the most part – obviously did not have an easy life. They had all kinds of burdens to bear. ...But what about us? Our lives are nothing like the lives of Galilean peasants in the year A.D. 29. Do *we* feel “weighed down”? I know a woman (who, by the way, does *not* live in Aspen or visit here) who has no job and no significant volunteer work that she does. Her only “burden” – if you can call it that – is traveling around the country to visit her family, planning the next vacation, and organizing social events to fill her calendar. People who don’t know her, or know other people like her, might laugh and say that they’d like to be as *un*-burdened as this woman. But, in fact, her idle life itself is a burden because it’s so empty. I think she’s looking for something to give meaning to her existence.

We all know people who have burdens they would never *name* as burdens.... For example: What about persons who carry the burden of needing to stay in perfect control of themselves —and also need to control everyone else they know? What about the people who always have to be right and never make a mistake? (Being perfect is quite a burden!) And there are individuals who always need to win, always be successful, and never be seen to fail or show any weakness. There are people who have a compulsive need to prove their worth over and over again by ever-greater achievements in making money or climbing the corporate ladder or in some other realm where they’re competing with others. —Of course, these people’s burdens are all neurotic. But they’re still *burdens*. ...And aren’t all of us just a little bit neurotic?

When I think about it, I really can’t come up with any people I know who *aren’t* burdened in some way. The people who aren’t obviously neurotic are mostly either facing financial problems, business problems, marital problems, addiction problems, have troubled children to deal with, or have a health crisis to face. And then there are the people – maybe some of you here this morning – who bear the heavy burden of leadership. When you’re the boss, you’re in charge. You live in an environment where everybody is looking to you for answers... or at least for guidance. Heck, even we pastors have our burdens. — There’s nothing that makes me feel more weighed down than to be invited to speak somewhere and be

told (as if this would make the job easier), “We just want you to come and give us a little inspiration.” — Do these people think I can be inspirational on demand?

Jesus said, “*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.*” When I feel like I’m being asked to produce “inspiration on demand,” I have to remind myself that I’m not on my own in this ministry. I’m a servant of Christ. I’m under *his* yoke. He’s steering, not me. Anything I have to say that’s inspirational at all, or that’s even worth hearing, can only come from Him. My job is to keep the ears of my heart open so I can hear Him and repeat what He says.

It’s the same way with all the burdens we carry. Even the neurotic ones... maybe even *especially* the neurotic ones! Jesus says, “*Come to me...*” One of the important things that Christ does in our lives is to show us the difference between the kinds of things we have to carry if we’re normal human beings, and the neurotic things that neither we nor anybody else should try to carry. People who can’t figure out what to do with their lives need to come to Jesus. People who are struggling with trying to be perfect, or who feel the need to control their lives and the lives of others, or who need constantly to be proving their value as human beings again and again need to come to Jesus. People who feel like they’re really losers unless they can win every contest need to come to Jesus and listen to what He has to say: “You don’t need to prove yourself to me by your achievements, and there’s no other Judge whose opinion is more important. I don’t expect you to be perfect, just to admit that you need help. And if you feel like your life is empty and meaningless, come, follow me and I’ll help you fill your idle hours with the joy of serving others.”

Notice, Jesus doesn’t say “Come to me and I’ll make your burdens disappear.” He doesn’t say “I’ll carry your load for you,” though that’s a common piece of conventional pulpit rhetoric. But what he does say is “By placing *my* yoke on your shoulders, I’ll give you the means of carrying everything else that you *need* to carry.”

When we have legitimate burdens: like the responsibility for raising and educating children, taking care of a sick spouse or parent, meeting our financial obligations, teaching students, or running a business, the Lord doesn’t make those responsibilities disappear. But he comes alongside us and says, “*Take my yoke upon you.*” In Hebrew the ordinary word for “yoke” means an ox-yoke – and these yokes were always double. Nobody plowed with a single ox. The common expression, “a yoke of oxen,” always meant *two* animals. When Jesus says, “*Take my yoke upon you,*” he’s asking us to be teamed with him. He says, “*Learn from me, for I am gentle and humble in heart, and you will find rest for your souls.*” He’s the Lord of All, but he cares about ordinary people like you and me. He wants to give us rest. Come, learn from Jesus. The plow-man teamed a young, untrained animal with a trained animal. Yoked with Christ, we learn from him. He carries our load with us every step of life’s way, and in every step he’s teaching us.

Sure, this “yoke” thing is a metaphor. Christ is not going to appear in your office on Tuesday to sit down and help you figure out how to finance the new plant. He’s not going to take the kids to day camp or drive your mother-in-law down to Grand Junction for her appointment with the doctor on Friday. You’re going to have to do those things yourself. But if you come to him, his Spirit will give you the support you need in order to live your life and carry your load with peace and serenity —even in the most trying of situations. With Jesus at your side, the load will never be too much. And when that burden is a cross you are carrying for others’ sake, you will taste the mercy of the Lord.