

Rest for our souls

I have been thinking about the well known verses in Matthew 11:28-30

“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, 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.”

As we head into 2022, we may feel a bit weary with the pandemic, with infighting among politicians, with dark days and winter. (Although the days are getting longer, Hurray!). Or we may be full of energy and life is going well. Either way Jesus is issuing an invitation to us to be yoked with him.

In their original context these verses spoke specifically to those burdened by Jewish law. The oral traditions of the Scribes and Pharisees went far beyond the demands of the law and became a heavy burden. Here Jesus is inviting the weary and burdened, those who can't keep up with the demands put upon them. In our case this can often be demands we put upon ourselves

Jesus starts off by asking us to Come: to hear and to respond to him. There are echoes of proverbs 8 in this (where wisdom calls out to mankind). Jesus is the incarnate wisdom of God and calls us to come to him.

In verse 29, Jesus specifically offers us rest for our souls. This isn't physical rest, like sleep, or sitting doing nothing or watching the telly. The rest Jesus offers is to our souls. He offers us rest from the demands and busyness of our minds, from man made burdens and demands, from distractions and ruminations, from anxieties and regrets.

A yoke joins two oxen together to work as a team. Jesus invites us to take his yoke and learn from him, he is inviting us to join him in harness, to allow him to take the lead.

William Barclay says this about the yoke

“Jesus says "My yoke is easy." The word "easy" is in Greek chrestos, which can mean well-fitting. In Palestine ox-yokes were made of wood; the ox was brought, and the measurements were taken. The yoke was then roughed out, and the ox wigs brought back to have the yoke tried on. The yoke was carefully adjusted, so that it would fit well, and not gall the neck of the patient beast. The yoke was tailor-made to fit the ox.

There is a legend that Jesus made the best ox-yokes in all Galilee, and that from all over the country men came to him to buy the best yokes that skill could make. In those days, as now, shops had their signs above the door; and it has been suggested that the sign above the door of the carpenter's shop in Nazareth may well have been: "My yokes fit well." It may well be that Jesus is here using a picture from the carpenter's shop in Nazareth where he had worked throughout the silent years.

Jesus says, "My yoke fits well." What he means is: "The life I give you is not a burden to gall you; your task is made to measure to fit you." Whatever God sends us is made to fit our needs and our abilities exactly” (From Barclay’s daily Study Bible)

I find the idea of the bespoke yoke for each of us a wonderful thought . God will be asking different things of all of us and leading us in different ways. We have the responsibility to ask for God’s strength in our lives, to seek to do his will, but he is there right beside us, ploughing the field with us.

I was thinking of a way that these verses could be used as a ‘Breath Prayer’ where we breathe in slowly and deeply on the first phrase, and then breathe out slowly on the second phrase. I’d suggest the following;

1st Phrase (breathe in) : one of the following, or all 3 in rotation.
‘Come to me/ Take my yoke/ Learn from me’

2nd phrase (breathe out) ‘And find rest for your soul’