

## No yoke ?

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Lord, you have taught us  
that all our doings without love are nothing worth:  
send your Holy Spirit,  
and pour into our hearts that most excellent gift of love,  
the true bond of peace and all virtues,  
without which whosoever lives is counted dead before you.

Our text may be found in today's gospel, Matthew 11 verses 29 and 30:

'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 first sang Handel's 'Messiah' some forty years ago. It was in Waltham Abbey Church, a substantial, Norman building on the edge of London on the edge of Epping Forest. I was a young English teacher at Davenant Foundation Grammar School for Boys which in the mid-sixties had moved out of the East End of London to the edge of Loughton. It felt awesome, awe-inspiring to sing so strong a work in such a beautiful, ancient centre of Christian worship. The chorus which ends the first part of the work is a setting of part of our text today: 'his yoke is easy, his burden is light'.

If you were going to try to sell something to someone, then you'd need an attractive product and good marketing. You'd need a slogan, a catchphrase that summed up your product – snappy, catchy, that sold what you had to offer to the public. If I were to try to sell Christianity to you, then what better than today's text which Handel set to music: **his yoke is easy, his burden is light** ?

How best to understand what Jesus is saying ? Context is everything and we need to start with a Pharisee's understanding of the Torah, the Law of Moses. Legalistic, nit-picking focussing on right behaviour, the 613 laws were interpreted so that there could be no doubt what was required of a righteous Jew trying to live the righteous life and to satisfy the demands of a demanding God. Not easy: a heavy set of responsibilities that easily could weigh down ordinary folk with numerous rules and regulations intended to inform and shape our lives.

In the face of such a mindset, Jesus was revolutionary, liberating, life-affirming. Jesus was not strict and harsh but **'gentle'**. Jesus was not self-righteous, overbearing and proud but **'humble'**. What a contrast to the Pharisees who opposed his teaching ! And no wonder they did because what Jesus taught was such a different way of making sense of the demands of God.

But unsurprisingly demands there are and they are suggested by the key image of our text, the **'yoke'**. The image of a yoke would have been familiar to a rural society, the heavy, wooden collar which cradled the neck of an ox and allowed it to be harnessed to the plough or to a cart and to drag a heavy load behind. And here we have a paradox. That which is a symbol of service and work becomes a

symbol of the distinctive message of what Jesus is preaching. Yes, to serve God is service, a form of work and of labour. But Jesus tells that to be yoked in God's service is easy on our shoulders and the burden we carry for him is light.

How can that be? It's simply so because what we are called to do as Christians is a labour of love. When Diana created such magnificent, elaborate displays of flowers in the past, it was understandably hard work but because she loved doing what she did, it was done with a light-heart because her heart was in what she was doing. Love of God is always central. To accept God loves us, that Jesus loves us, that the Holy Spirit loves us can mean that we in turn can love him, love them, and respond to his love by reflecting their love to others by what we do for our neighbour.

William Barclay shared the following apocryphal story about Jesus the carpenter. Barclay reports that the carpentry workshop in Nazareth where Jesus worked before taking up his public ministry was well-known for the quality of the yoke he made there. Each yoke was bespoke for a particular animal; it was made to measure and fit for purpose. It was essential that it did not rub or chafe the ox's neck and shoulders for if it did, then the animal could not do its job properly or easily.

And that my friends can be true for us too. Why Christianity is so attractive is that it is a faith fit for purpose, a set of beliefs designed to make us fully what God intends us to be, not diminish and restrict us but to realise our true potential. So let's take up the yoke and serve Jesus as best we can to the best of our ability.

I have spoken in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit,  
Amen.

*Preached at the Eucharist*

*St Bartholomew's, Dinard*

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G: Sermons 30 : No yoke

