



Fifth Sunday after Pentecost

Sermon by Revd Margaret Place



Sunday 5 July 2020

READINGS

Genesis 24: 34-38, 42-49, 58-67; Psalm 45: 10-17; Romans 7: 15-25a; Matthew 11: 16-19, 25-30

The Yoke of Jesus - We've Only Just Begun

I wonder if you have become aware of the fact that people have become so much more nasty. The “comments” section after some wonderful, informative webinars or online meetings are littered with pettiness, prejudice and inconsiderate rudeness. I suppose without the restraint afforded by constantly mixing with others in public, the politically correct (or maybe just polite) mores which define our behaviours are missing, and who we really are comes to the surface more easily. It's true too we are also letting our dress code slip – working from home doesn't demand the same care, and while there aren't many who are still in their pyjamas in the afternoon, we are not taking the trouble with our appearance that we once did. Of course, we can always blame lockdown for the lack of hairdressing and other grooming, the need to cover our beautiful faces with masks, and no one wants to spend hours in the closed space of shops trying on different outfits any more. And all this is before we see the ugliness of racism, xenophobia, paternalistic criticism, and we are irritated by very poor desperate people who are in front of us everywhere. Things are slipping, and it adds to our irritability.

Underlying all this is fear. We are dealing with a virus that no one knows or understands, and every time someone finds out more about it, it is worse than we thought. Add that to the horror stories and fake news, and we are very, very scared. And the destruction of economies throughout the world makes for extreme the poverty at the lowest levels a together with serious loss of funds from those who always supposed themselves to be, if not wealthy, at least able to look after themselves, has made us frightened. Our very survival seems to be under an ominous threat.

Perhaps that is why, those of us who of us who are Christians can also identify very much more strongly with today's message from St Paul. We know how we plan to use this time wisely, how we look hard to see the hand of God even in the time of pandemic, spend more time in prayer, use the opportunity to give up smoking and various other very laudable projects, but we find we land up with computer games, rubbish on the TV, and baking or buying stuff we really shouldn't eat. We can't even make ourselves do the most basic things, never mind making a strong statement about racism, helping to feed the

poor, stopping doing selfish things and wasting so much time and energy. It all feels just too much, and escaping into various pleasure worlds gives us a break from worrying about what we don't seem able to control, and from the fear that "they" will use all this to get back at us.

It seems that our "wisdom" has escaped us. We are like those querulous children Jesus speaks of let's play wedding, you can dance "I don't want to." "Lets play funerals. Come on let's cry." No I don't feel like it." All the laws in the world can't make us behave, and we are constantly criticizing those in charge of hospitals, government, finances and the like who we say are stupid and are wholly responsible for our suffering. And we feel so hopeless, we surreptitiously take our temperature in case we have the virus because we feel bad enough and scared enough for that to be the case.

But it's not all bad. Jesus is rejoicing in the simple, or the "children" amongst his followers who get it, rather than the wise. They are like those who are putting their shoulder to the wheel, asking no questions and getting on with it. I had a conversation with someone in the beauty industry last week who was talking of how people at the moment are too scared to come in for the normal treatments but needed the therapy. She had worked out how to use space safely and well, and how to package her treatments so that no one would be longer than 20 minutes to half an hour in her salon, and how more people can be accommodated who will pay less for smaller treatments, and, she said 'I'm still making people happy.' There are others who have found ways of making their daily work more meaningful, and helping those less fortunate, and many who are just enjoying "being." Somehow when people have come to terms with not being in control, and life is easier for them.

You can't analyse this virus, nor can we know when, if ever, it will leave us. Whatever happens, the old life is gone, and a new normal has to be dealt with. The "wise" with their should and oughts and "why don't they" will continue to get nastier and nastier, the more they are unable to control their own lives, while the simple will continue nursing the sick, becoming the family for the dying when that becomes necessary, transporting food to those who need it, working with the science around this virus, trying to keep their businesses going, and giving a hand wherever they can. Here it seems that submission to current circumstances is how best we can let God work in us and through us, and simple acceptance gives us peace.

Because Jesus had been a carpenter, he would have known about making yokes for Oxen. A good carpenter would have known how to fit it so that the oxen would not have had blistered necks and sore shoulders, but would have been able to work well and for long hours. If we take on his yoke, what will that mean?

We know that the yoke Jesus asks us to take is not one of hardship and strain, but one that is made for us, and which will allow us to work to the best of our ability. The yoke of the Pharisees was one of legalism

which caused huge additional suffering to the oppressed laboring classes of the time. Not only were they struggling to survive the hardship of labour under a demanding Roman regime, there were always Pharisees telling them they weren't doing enough, and this is what they should be doing to become good enough for God. Jesus' yoke is about fit. If we follow him, it will be what he designed for us in the first place, and it will be easy because it was made for us, we weren't made for it.

Our immediate task is to identify what we have been called to. Perhaps we have to do what we've always done, and our yokes are worn and shiny with age but still comfortable. Maybe we are being taken to a totally different field, and a new yoke is being fitted. Let us submit faithfully, because we can be sure that, while we can only see rough ground in front of us, under the guidance of Jesus, behind us, where we can't see, a whole field is being ploughed. When the summer comes there will be much growth, and a huge harvest will result in the autumn which follows. By grace, we will then see that we were being guided all the time, and that under the leadership of Jesus, hard though it was, and pointless as it seemed at the time, a new world was being born and tired old ways have been put aside. The ground which is so hard at the moment will then be bursting with new life, and the harvest will indeed be plentiful. Nothing is beyond our God, and hard as it will be – and it's going to become very hard, nevertheless, under the guidance of our Saviour, we are even now preparing the ground for a totally new world.