

Wednesday Reflection for Advent by David Kennedy

Jesus says, "Come to me, all you who are weary and are carrying heavy burdens, and I will give you rest. ²⁹Take my yoke upon you, and learn from me, for I am gentle and humble in heart, and you will find rest for your souls. ³⁰For my yoke is easy, and my burden is light."

Matthew 11. 28-30

'Coming' is the meaning of the word *Advent*. In this holy season we recall how Jesus came to dwell among us in great humility; that he will come again in his glorious majesty, and that day by day he comes to us when we read the Bible, when we pray, when we receive the sacrament, when we remember his great words 'I am with you always'.

But this morning's Gospel reading invites us to come to him: "Come to me, all you who are weary and are carrying heavy burdens, and I will give you rest.

This is one of the Comfortable Words in the Prayer Book Communion service. We all carry burdens and we can all become weary. Yet here, Jesus gently assures us that he will help us to carry our burdens; that he will give us rest in the midst of our weariness. Today, we can all respond to his gracious invitation, 'Come to me'.

But there is a great paradox in how the gospel continues. Burdens are by definition burden-some, heavy, weighty. And as for yokes – well, I have never had to carry a yoke, but I have seen them in agricultural museums and I wouldn't like to have to bear one. I could well imagine the strain on the back of the neck, the shoulders, the biceps, the forearms. I think I would be very pleased and relieved to lay down a yoke.

And yet, Jesus invites us to lay *his yoke* upon ourselves, and he then astonishes us by speaking of an *easy* yoke and a *light* burden. What was he talking about?

The idea of the yoke was and is common in Judaism. Becoming an adult Jew was and is all about taking on what was called the 'yoke of the Law' and the 'yoke of the commandments'. For pious Jews, this lifting on of the yoke of the Law was joyful and welcome. You only have to read Psalm 119 to sense the delight in God's law, statutes, testimonies, ordinances and precepts. Keeping the commandments was life-giving, and as such could never be seen as a burden. Jesus himself would have gladly assented to all this. But there was a problem in certain understandings of the Judaism of his day. Somehow the countless rules and regulations and the legalism that went with them had become an unbearable weight. Jesus said of the scribes and Pharisees:

*They tie up **heavy burdens**, hard to bear, and they put them on the shoulders of others.*

Jesus recalls us to the basics – love for God and love for our neighbour. The Jesus religion is not a rule book, but a response, a generous response, to people and situations where that response is led by love. Now, don't misunderstand me; Christianity isn't like a walk in the park. Truly to love God, and truly to love the neighbour is costly. Jesus' compassion, his healing power, his preaching and teaching, his practical serving, all cost him something. His great act of atonement and reconciliation cost him his very life.

But in the midst of that, he was the great bringer of joy, the bringer of hope, the one who healed and restored, who said to people time and time again, 'Do not be afraid', 'cheer up'; for God's rule is coming, indeed is here, to put things right. Religion is the free and loving response to that vision of love and holiness that we call God and the values of his Kingly rule.

I love that phrase 'rest for your souls'. This is something about the very centre of our being; something at the very heart of us, that knows and experiences the gift and promise of rest. Even in the midst of the storm, Jesus was at rest. And it is that sense of inner communion with God that then flows out in the free response of love for God and love for the neighbour. Christian faith has come to identify that inner centred-ness on God as the gift of the indwelling Holy Spirit. Remember the words of St Paul, 'the love of God has been poured into our hearts by the Holy Spirit he has given us'.

Most of all, it is about daily embracing of a yoke and a burden – the yoke and burden of Jesus, whose yoke is easy and burden light, and who gives the gift of rest in the very centre of our lives through the indwelling Holy Spirit. And so, it is a vision of Christian religion which is never about rules and regulations, but the Spirit-led, responsive life. It is a Jesus-shaped religion. This is what we are called to offer to an often weary and heavy-burdened world which longs for rest.

Come to me, all you that are weary and are carrying heavy burdens and I will give you rest. Take my yoke on you and learn from me; for I am gentle and humble in heart, and you find rest for your souls. For my yoke is easy, and my burden is light.