

***Come to me and rest: Matthew 11: 16-19 and Romans 7: 15-25a***  
**Online Sermon by Rev Phil Wootton for 05/07/2020**

‘Come to me, all who labour and are heavy laden, and I will give you rest.’ It’s a wonderful promise. Today we have a particular weariness, a weariness of lockdown. For some very obviously because of the pressures of home-educating children whilst working from home and caring for infirm relatives; or simply of working harder with fewer staff or colleagues on the front line. For many, it’s the strange feeling of tiredness without apparently having done anything. It’s the weariness that comes from lack of stimulation, of being stuck within the same four walls, of missing the normal interaction of face-to-face contact and of the variety that life normally brings. As Christians, we are blessed indeed that we have Christ as our constant companion, that we can rejoice in the beauty of God in nature and in human life, and that we can meditate on the wondrous love of God. But, for myself, if I’m honest, I still feel weary. I feel there is more to be received from Jesus who promises: ‘Come to me, all who labour and are heavy laden, and I will give you rest.’

When I think of rest, my first mental picture is of gently snoozing on a sunny afternoon following a bigger than necessary lunch accompanied by a more than generous glass of white wine. (My fantasies are obviously coming out here!) Whilst we should not necessarily feel guilty about such pleasures, I doubt any of us really think this is what Jesus had in mind. ‘Stay awake!’ is far too often his command (eg Matthew 24: 42). Our readings today help us to go deeper. They are, in themselves, quite disjointed, so, I’ll go through them in the order we’ve heard them, and see what each part has to say about weariness and rest.

First, in Romans 7, Paul explores the human dilemma, which is exhausting! Human nature is all mixed up. Paul’s convoluted sentences well express the turmoil we find ourselves in. We wear ourselves out trying do the right thing but so often getting it wrong. What we do for the best of motives ends up causing harm. What a hopeless state we’re in, Paul says. But: ‘Thanks be to God through our Lord Jesus Christ’. Christ cuts through all our rubbish to get to the real issue. He slices through the accumulation of self-deception, self-justification and self-promotion, and offers forgiveness, peace, acceptance and love. We don’t need to prove ourselves, because we are infinitely loved already. If we’ll accept it, he gives rest for the soul.

Then, returning to the Gospel, verses 16-19 are about not having a critical spirit. John the Baptist came like an Old Testament prophet, all wild and hairy, and people said he’s mad. Jesus came mixing with ordinary people in everyday life, and they say he’s immoral. In the same sentence they complain about too much austerity and about too much fun! People love to complain, but complaining is hard work. It gets you stressed. And trying to meet everyone’s criticism is hard work: you can’t please everyone. Jesus is not saying you shouldn’t kick up a fuss when you see injustice and wrong-doing, but, please, take a break from petty criticism. We are all loved by God: receive rest for your soul.

You can't know everything either (verses 25-26). Jesus rejoices that the mysteries of his relationship with his heavenly Father are not understood by experts, but have been made known to little children. Being an expert is hard work: 'Of making many books there is no end, and much study wears the body,' says the wise old preacher in Ecclesiastes 12: 12. Children do better, not just because they are more accepting, but because they're better at asking questions. Professor Tom MacLeish, who speaks on science and religion, says what's important for scientific progress is less the right answers than posing the right questions, and for that you need a good (informed) imagination. Curiosity about the big issues of life and faith stimulates and renews the mind, and so rests the soul.

Moving on to the end of our passage (verses 29-30) Jesus follows the promise of rest by saying, 'Take my yoke upon you, and learn from me... For my yoke is easy, and my burden is light.' The word 'yoke' is often used to mean repression or slavery, but Jesus is very clearly saying his is not like that. The yoke was used on farms before there were tractors to hold together two oxen ploughing a field. The yoke around their shoulders made them work together, pull in tandem, and keep on track. With Jesus' 'easy yoke' I imagine my work shared with him, but in such a way that he really takes the strain. I am privileged to walk alongside, and know it will be much easier if I keep in step with him. The Pharisees of his day spoke of being 'yoked to the law of God'. And yet they became burdened and weighed down by pursuing the letter of the law. Jesus' yoke, in contrast, is light, because as we learn from him, keeping in step with him, we follow naturally the rhythms of how we're made.

So, drawing this together, we see human weariness coming out of our struggles, tensions and stresses – our desire to do the right thing, or more often to be seen to do the right thing – to prove to other people, or to ourselves, or perhaps to God, that we are indeed the people we like to imagine we are. But God knows when we're not that person, and loves us still. In fact God loves the person he made, not the one we would pretend to be. God forgives (where forgiveness is necessary) utterly and completely. God accepts, utterly and completely. God gives rest, if we'll accept it, utterly and completely. That rest is not about complacency or a do-nothing attitude. It is about joyfully accepting the yoke of Jesus and walking in step with him.

Finally, if you take a sneak preview into the next chapter (Matthew 12) you'll read an account of one of Jesus' conflicts with the religious leaders over the Sabbath. The Sabbath is one of the great gifts of God to Israel and to the world. It is the life-giving principle that each week requires a day of rest – a day to stop work and to seek recreation. The Pharisees had fallen into all the dangers I've talked about, making it burdensome, a set of rules to follow slavishly, a chance to show off their religiosity and expertise, and an excuse to criticise everyone else. Jesus shows the true sabbath rest is not about ceasing to do good, but making space to absorb his words, enjoy his presence and to be renewed in spirit. It is for healing and wholeness, for trusting God's wonderful provision and giving thanks. It is for worship of the One who is Lord of the Sabbath. When we are truly about his work, then we also truly have his rest.