

Bishop Jonathan's Sermon – Trinity 4

Matthew 11: 16-19, 25-30

5th July 2020

In the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.

Right at the start of this sermon, I need to make an admission: I have never found prayer easy. I have often found it hard to pray in the kind of disciplined, focused way that I know I should do. And yet I know I need to set aside the time to meet with God and to pray regularly. When I do, it makes a real difference to who I am and how I am – yet often it can get squeezed out. So as we talk about the subject of prayer today, please remember that I am no expert. I struggle with this as much as anybody!

Let me ask you a question: *how fast does a pair of oxen walk when they are ploughing a field.* It's not a trick question and there are no prizes for guessing the answer: *slowly!* This is the image that Jesus uses in our Bible reading from Matthew 11: "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." Now for anyone who can't picture it, a "yoke" is the collar that holds two oxen together and that connects them to the plough they are pulling. It keeps them in step with one another – they have to walk at the same slow pace and if they don't the whole thing falls apart.

So what Jesus is saying is this: "It's no good rushing along at your hectic speed and trying to make it all happen; you need to walk in step with me, walk alongside me, at my pace. Otherwise you will be burned out and frazzled, instead of finding rest for your soul. Stop trying to do too much – being driven along by the ways of the world – and instead learn to walk in step with the rhythm of grace."

To my mind, Matthew 11: 28-30 are probably the most significant verses of Scripture that people in our generation need to hear. I know for certain that they are the ones I most need to hear! Most of us are trying so hard – with our families, in our jobs, to make sure our children or grandchildren have all that they need, to help our church to do the things we think it needs to do, in order to serve God and the people of our community.

But in the end, maybe we are missing the one thing that really matters – which is our own need to slow down in order to pray and to meet with God, because when we do that, then everything else changes; we change and the whole quality of what we do changes – because it is then not about what we do for God but about our walking in step with God and working alongside him.

We need to make the space and time to develop our relationship with God. *But that cannot and will not happen unless we first slow down* – in fact, pause and come to a complete halt at times – in order to meet with him and to learn to walk in step with him.

So often we are *driven* in our lives, by the pressures of work or family life or whatever, but most often it is by the insistent, insidious voice that whispers from within: "You are not good enough, you need to do more; I am not satisfied with what you are doing or even with who

you are.” That voice comes from our past, from our upbringing, from our parents or from our schoolteachers. It comes from the world around us – and it comes from the Devil himself. It is what drives people to try harder and harder and to neglect themselves and their relationships and their children. It is what leads to burn-out and the breakdown of families; or else it leads to people giving up so that they stop trying altogether because the risk of failure is too great and it’s easier to retreat into isolation and depression than to face the world and try again.

This is the disease of our age. We place huge pressures on ourselves and on those around us – and not least in the Church. We withhold approval from those who don’t live up to our expectations of what they should be or what they should do – and as a result we turn the church into a community of the over-burdened rather than a community of grace. These are the words we need to hear: *“Come to me, all you who are weary and burdened, and I will give you rest.”*

That transformation will only happen when we learn to pause and allow our hearts and souls to be healed, before learning to walk more slowly, in step with Jesus and what one translation calls “the unforced rhythms of grace.” This is where true prayer begins – with our pride and self-reliance being broken and with our opening our hearts to receive the healing grace of God so that we are set free from living driven lives, and learn to walk in step with Jesus, yoked to him and ploughing his furrow instead of our own.

So what does that mean for us today, as we begin hopefully to emerge from the lockdown of the last three months?

Many of us need to acknowledge that we are driven by the pressures upon us – including that insistent inner voice that always asks for more from ourselves and from those around us. We need to ask Jesus to give us rest for our hearts and souls – and to fill us with his grace that can set us free to walk in step with him.

Yes, we will still often lead busy lives and yes, we will still face all sorts of pressures upon us – but perhaps we can begin to find an inner freedom to replace that nagging sense that somehow or other we should be doing more. That in turn can enable us to order our priorities differently and perhaps to be a little gentler with ourselves and humbler in our dealings with others; it can set us free to focus on the things that really matter – including our relationships with our families and with our colleagues and friends; and it will also help us to become as a church a little bit more of a community of grace and a sign of God’s kingdom.

We need to build that kind of rhythm into our lives – making space and time day by day to pause and listen and allow God’s voice to be heard: *“Come to me, all you who are weary and burdened, and I will give you rest.”* Then, and only then, will we be able to walk in step with Jesus and to find rest for our souls. Amen.