

Revd. Terry Ward-Hall, 5 July 2020

Come to me all you who labour and are heavily burdened, and I will give you rest.

Have you ever wondered if Jesus meant that literally? After a day spent toiling in the fields, and getting home tired and thirsty – don't worry Jesus will provide a nice comfy sofa to sit on.

Or did he mean it legalistically, pointing the finger to the priests, scribes and rabbis who had added so many laws to the 10 commandments that that it was impossible to keep up with them all. What I mean is that the 10 commandments had become 613 individual laws. 365 positive in nature 'do this' and 248 negative 'don't do that'. Almost as many and as bad as the do's and don't of lockdown.

I don't think he was either. Literal or legalistic. For example he said in John 10 'I am the good shepherd. I know my own and they know me'. That's metaphorical language. Jesus is not literally a shepherd, but his followers recognize him as someone caring for them like a shepherd cares for his sheep.

Nor do I think he was legalistic. He healed a man's withered hand on a Sabbath and on another Sabbath his disciples plucked grain to eat as they were walking across a field and when challenged by the legalists of the day told them 'The Sabbath was made for man, not man for the Sabbath'

Much of Jesus' teaching to his disciples is focussed on living by the spirit of the law, not the letter. Peter once asked, 'Lord, how often shall my brother sin against me, and I forgive him? Until seven times?' and Jesus answered 'I don't tell you until seven times, but until seventy times seven'. In other words, as long and as many times as it takes.

And the group of people more focussed on the letter of the law rather than the spirit of the law were the scribes and priests. In a later chapter Jesus saves some of his harshest words for the legalists, calling them hypocrites. Another occasion saw him confront an angry crowd who had gathered to stone a woman to death for adultery. They were going to do that because that is what the law of Moses demanded. What does Jesus do? He doodles in the sand and quietly says 'He who is without sin, throw the first stone' and slowly but surely each and everyone of them drops their stone and slinks away. When they've gone Jesus asks the woman where her accusers are. Did no one condemn you? And when she says no, he says 'Neither do I'.

Jesus was not legalistic and often showed contempt for those who were. Jesus made it clear we should not listen to those who merely talked the talk but didn't walk the walk. A little later he talks about the scribes and Pharisees who place hugely heavy burdens across men's shoulders whilst at the same time not lifting even a little finger to help.

That is in total contrast to the closing verses of our reading from Matthew:

'Come to me, all you who are weary and burdened, and I will give you rest. 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.'

So what can we take from those words today? For starters, Christianity should not be a burden. Jesus promises us that his yoke is easy and his burden is light. After all Jesus probably knew all about physical yokes with his carpentry background and certainly as the son of God he knew about spiritual yolks.

No, Christianity should not be a burden for us, but a joy – a joy in whatever we do to serve Christ.

I've just completed a lengthy annual Diocesan self-assessment that all Curates have to complete about what makes me tick and why I'm doing what I'm doing. How effective I might or might not be? In other words, Is my burden heavy or light?

One of the 58 statements I had to write a response to – yes 58 statements – “was Ordained ministers depend on the grace and gifts of God to sustain and energize humble, self-giving love and Christ-like service in the church”.

I took me all of a milli-second to realize that I am totally dependent on God's grace and gifts to energize and sustain my ministry and fortunately, doing what I do makes my life overall one of joy. Thomas Merton a famous theologian once said “God is too real to be met anywhere than in reality” and the reality is that none of us can do any better than living a life based on Christ's teaching and love. Because in learning to receive and share that teaching and love, whenever my life becomes weary or burdened as it inevitably will at times, I can be assured that Christ is there waiting to help and refresh me.