

## THE YOKE OF CHRIST

Zechariah 9. 9-12

Romans 7. 15-25a

Matthew 11. 16-19, 25-30

I speak to you in the name of  the Father, and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit.  
Amen.

‘Woe to you Chorazin! Woe to you Bethsaida! And to you Capernaum, the town where I made my home. Don’t think you’re so great. Sodom will be far better off than you will be’. Chorazin, Bethsaida and Capernaum are the names of towns where our Lord spent much of his ministry; they are the towns where he did many of his mighty works. The people in those towns knew Jesus well; and he knew them, too: too well, perhaps. He knew their unbelief, their unwillingness to change and their refusal to yoke themselves to him and his gospel.

St Matthew calls these few verses (which, by the way, were not included in our gospel reading) Christ’s ‘reproach of the cities’. That’s a nice way of saying that our Lord is really ticked off; he’s telling them how it is. The lectionary unfortunately omits this little section. We don’t much like reproach. We don’t like it in our lives, and we don’t like it in our scriptures. Most of us would rather skip quickly to the good part, that part about the humble and gentle Jesus, who we think is going to make life easy. But we need to hear these words of reproach. They are important words, so I’ve put them back in. With Christ, reproach is not rejection; it is the other side of care and concern.

Our Lord continues. ‘You are like a bunch of spoiled kids, unhappy with whatever is offered you. You want it your way or no way. John the Baptist came neither eating nor drinking, and you said he was a nut, a man possessed by craziness. I come eating

and drinking, and you call me a glutton and a drunkard, a guy who hangs out with the wrong kind of people’.

I wonder what Jesus would say to us today as individuals, as a parish and as a Bailiwick? Are we different from Chorazin, Bethsaida and Capernaum? How have we responded to Christ and to his gospel?

Reflecting on this question raises a deeper and more fundamental question. To what, or to whom are we *yoked*? To what or to whom do we give ourselves? What or who takes priority in our lives, orienting how we live and relate to others and how we make decisions? We all harness our lives to something: another person, work, family, success, reputation, our country. Sometimes our yokes are more internalised. They can be fear, anxiety, anger, particular beliefs and opinions, or the losses and tragedies of our lives. Regardless, they are the relationships and attachments that we depend on for meaning and, for better or for worse, they shape the direction of our lives. We’ve all got them; and we usually have more than one.

What yokes do you wear? And which one is primary? We know the right answer, of course, and that is Jesus. But is that really how we live? Is it reflected by our deeds and in our relationships? Apparently, it was not in the cases of Chorazin, Bethsaida and Capernaum.

If we are going to call ourselves Christians, then we must fully yoke ourselves to our Lord. He must be the primary and determining yoke. We cannot simply come to church, hear the gospel, say our prayers and then go home to lunch. The gospel of Christ demands a response. That’s why our Lord is so harsh with his words. The people of Chorazin, Bethsaida and Capernaum had seen God come amongst them, and they had witnessed the signs. Jesus had cleansed their lepers, healed their sick,

calmed the sea, cast out their demons, forgiven their sins, preached and taught in their cities. Still they rejected Christ and, before him, John the Baptist.

Sometimes we are like those children in the marketplace, unhappy with whatever is offered us. We want the gospel to fit our beliefs, desires and agendas rather than having the gospel *shape* our beliefs, desires and agendas. But for our Lord, that simply is not an option. We can either dance, celebrating and giving thanks for the coming of God amongst us in Jesus; or we can mourn our sins, the brokenness of our lives and the pain of the world. But we must respond. We must choose one or the other. Either choice is to wear the yoke of Christ. Both will reorient our lives and priorities.

What does that mean for us? It means that we take our life of discipleship seriously. It means that we persist in prayer, because we are more keen to enter into an intimate relationship with God than to simply get what we want. It means that we care for the poor, feed the hungry and defend the oppressed. It means that we love our enemies and offer forgiveness before it is asked for. It means that we let go of anger. It means that our faith, and our faith-fulness, are evident to others because of the way we live and speak. We live day by day praising God, giving thanks for his gifts and blessings and trusting that he will provide for us.

To be yoked to anything or anyone other than our Lord will only leave us weary and burdened. Our lives will be frenzied and fragmented. We will end up comparing, competing and judging ourselves and each other. We will act as one person in one situation, and as someone else in a different situation. We will lose our internal integrity; our reserves will run dry; and we will find ourselves exhausted, with nothing of depth or substance to offer.

Are we weary? Are we burdened? If so, this may be because we are not fully wearing the yoke of Jesus. Too often, we treat our weariness and medicate our burdens with

retail therapy, addictions, a new toy, a holiday, a nap, a day off, busyness and perfectionism. But interior voids cannot be filled by exterior things. More often than not, after such treatment we end up being just as weary and just as burdened as we were before. These ‘solutions’ and ‘cures’ are not the antidote to our exhaustion. The antidote to our exhaustion begins with whole-heartedness; and that wholeheartedness is only found in sharing the yoke of Christ. When we share in the yoke of Christ, the heart of God and the heart of humanity beat together as one.

Our Lord isn’t upset because the cities of Chorazin, Bethsaida and Capernaum have misbehaved. His heart is breaking because they have chosen a life that is less than what they were created for, a life that is less than what God is offering. This is why his words of reproach soon become words of invitation, love, care and concern. ‘Come to me, all you that are weary and are carrying heavy burdens, 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’.<sup>1</sup>

To take on the yoke of Jesus is to take on his *life*. ‘Take my yoke upon you, and learn from me’, he says. ‘Let your heart love like mine. Let your mind be filled with the same concerns as mine. Let your feet walk in step with mine. Let your hands touch the world like mine. Let your eyes see the Father like mine. Live and move in tandem with me, as one, and you will find rest for your soul’.

Amen.

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<sup>1</sup> Jesus’s words in Matthew 11 about his ‘easy’ yoke and his ‘light’ burden are among the best-known in the New Testament. The word usually translated as ‘light’ is accurately rendered as meaning something that is light in terms of weight. But the other word associated with Jesus’s yoke—the Greek word *chrestos*—means something more than ‘easy’. *Chrestos* carries with it more of a ring of ‘kindness’ and of ‘pleasantness’. Apparently, Jesus’s yoke is the opposite of what we would usually associate with yokes. Jesus’s yoke is a kind and pleasant phenomenon. It is not a despised thing, but is gentle and kind, as when someone you love lays his or her hand on you to encourage you, to love you, to lead you gently and lovingly where you should go and to that place where you can flourish.