

[Genesis 24:34-38, 42-49, 58-67](#)

[Psalm 45: 11-18](#)

[Romans 7:15-25a](#)

[Matthew 11:16-19, 25-30](#)

A SERMON PREACHED BY THE REVEREND ALISTAIR SO ON THE EIGHTH SUNDAY AFTER PENTECOST, JULY 6, 2008, AT ALL HALLOWS CHURCH, SOUTH RIVER PARISH, IN DAVIDSONVILLE, MARYLAND

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

My electronic photo library is expanding. And recently, I received a series of travel photos from a friend who had just returned from his trip to Tibet, the rooftop of the world. I was particularly drawn to the pictures of the yaks, the long-haired Himalayan bovines that are as much an icon of that region as are the Summit of Mount Everest or the Potala Palace of Lhasa. In one set of pictures, I saw a yak carrying all the luggage and loads of the trekkers so that they could concentrate their souls and bodies on climbing at seventeen thousand feet above sea level. It's amazing to see that the yaks can do so well with such burdens, while the trekkers are struggling to walk with even their light backpacks. I can almost imagine the yak saying, "Come on folks, your yoke is easy and your burden is light...so hurry up and catch up with me!" The last picture of the set shows a group of satisfied trekkers after completing their arduous hike. I could almost feel their exhilaration and liberating accomplishment through the pictures. Likewise, there is important and hard work to be done in the Kingdom of God, but this work is profoundly satisfying and liberating.

In today's Gospel lesson from Matthew, we heard the comforting words of Jesus,

"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."---
Matthew 11:28-30

What does Jesus mean by this saying? In order for us to understand that more deeply, we need to have an understanding of the background of this agricultural image. This is an image of an animal harnessed to do work; the yoke provides discipline and direction. In Judaism the yoke-image was used in connection with wisdom and the Torah. The yoke is a symbol of obedience to God's law. In Sirach 51:26 of the Apocrypha, the sage invites prospective students to "put your neck under the yoke, and let your souls receive instruction." In Matthew, the image is tied directly to Jesus. In a revolutionary manner, Jesus will become the new Torah for the new Israel: the Church. And his yoke will not impose the oppressive load of the old religion. His teachings about the true meaning of the observance of the Sabbath and other Jewish laws distinguish him from the strict and narrow-minded Pharisees. (Harrington, p. 168) For Jesus, true religion resides in one's heart. And the priority of our calling is always to love God and love others first. This calling liberates us from culturally conditioned conventions. Therefore, we see Jesus healing the sick on a Sabbath day; we see him building relationships with the outcasts of his day. As a result, the Pharisees call him "a friend of tax-collectors and sinners."

The work of the Kingdom of God can be challenging at times. But our devotion to God's work can also liberate us. In fact, Jesus' easy yoke and light burden can prepare us for the obstacles we must face

as disciples. Jesus' yoke is easy and his burden is light not because there is little to do or the road is safely paved ahead of us. To the contrary, there is a cross to bear (Matthew 16:24) and the world is full of wolves (Matthew 10:16). (Long , p. 132) The yoke of Jesus is easy and his burden is light because following him is liberating and life-giving. Jesus ushers in the new Kingdom of God: a divine reign where all are welcome, and "where mercy and truth have met together, and righteousness and peace have kissed each other." (Psalm 85:10) Following Jesus liberates the human soul because his way is the way of God; following Jesus liberates the human soul because his heart profoundly satisfies our deepest yearning; following Jesus is also a process of soul finding for each one of us---a process that continues to lead toward our union with God through Christ. Following Jesus is a journey of love.

And "love is always a process involving purifications, renunciations, and painful transformations ... and that is how it is a journey to maturity." (Pope Benedict XVI)

Beloved in Christ, last Sunday, I mentioned that a characteristic of a mature Christian life is the capacity to stand firm in one's faith while understanding that even as faithful Christians, we will not always agree on everything. Our challenge is to continue to carry the yoke of Jesus and labor for the harvest of God's inclusive reign as one Body in Christ. Just as Jesus faced the chastisement and challenges from the Pharisees in his day, the church continues to face our own Pharisees in our time and place. Recently, certain primates of the Anglican churches in the Global South issued a statement in their gathering in Jerusalem known as the Global Anglican Future Conference (GAFCON). They defiantly vow to continue to interfere with our internal affairs by promoting schisms in the Episcopal Church as they see fit. Our Presiding Bishop, the Most Reverend Katharine Jefferts Schori responded, saying,

"Much of the Anglican world must be lamenting the latest emission from GAFCON. Anglicanism has always been broader than some find comfortable. This statement does not represent the end of Anglicanism, merely another chapter in a centuries-old struggle for dominance by those who consider themselves the only true believers. Anglicans will continue to worship God in their churches, serve the hungry and needy in their communities, and build missional relationships with others across the globe, despite the desire of a few leaders to narrow the influence of the gospel..."

Indeed, the breadth and inclusion of Anglicanism is a reflection of the easy yoke of Jesus and his light burden. We continue to live out this way of God in the Episcopal Church. And All Hallows is a place that truly takes comfort in these comfortable words of Jesus. Our desire to grow in faith and size must be in congruence with Jesus' call to come to him if we want to be solidly on God's way of peace and love. Coming to Jesus and learning from him means to model his meekness and humility in our relationships with each other. Coming to Jesus and learning from him means to remain faithful to the Gospel message of inclusion and love. Let us live a Gospel that is sincere and life-giving, while avoiding the stuffiness and choking grip of doctrinaire conformity sometimes too rampant in the Christian world today.

While the overall ethos of our parish is Christ's promise of an easy yoke and light burden, sometimes, we don't exactly feel that way. The reason for that is that we are a stretched cell in terms of church sizes. We are an in-between church. We are transitioning from a pastoral size parish to a program size parish. What that means is that many of our ministries are budding and growing and we have many visitors interested in us, while we are very limited in terms of our manpower and womanpower to take on leadership roles and to get things done. This can become a big burden for those who take on leadership positions. What a statement of faith and sharing of yoke and burden would it be to see more parishioners take on different ministries for the sake of the Kingdom of God!

he yoke of Jesus is easy and his burden is light because his way is God's liberating way and because we have the church. If we were all lone rangers and hermits, our spiritual and material lives would be very difficult since we are created by God to be social by nature. Our burdens would be very heavy. But with the church, we, being the different parts of the Body of Christ, can complement each other and share our yoke and burden, and truly make his call a reality. As our nation just celebrated the 232nd anniversary of our independence, may we be reminded the importance of "*E pluribus unum*." Indeed, "from many" we are "one." All the baptized form the Body of Christ.

Sisters and brothers, Jesus invites us to come to him and learn from him. Open, open wide the doors for Christ! May we continue to heed his sacred call to do God's work in the world, for his yoke is easy and his burden is light.

Amen.

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