

Trinity 5A

We humans are really good at excuses, we have had lots of practice since Adam and Eve started the ball rolling by first blaming each other, then the serpent, and finally even blaming God for their rebellion against their Creator. Give us enough time and we can justify or rationalise away just about anything we do, especially when it comes to our relationship with God. Let me give you some true-life examples.

Firstly, many years ago, I went white water rafting down the Zambesi Gorge at Victoria Falls in Zimbabwe. At one point on the trip our guide was alone in the raft with me while the others were swimming in a calm stretch of the river. The guide did what people often seem to feel compelled to do when confronted with a minister of religion : he launched into a half-confession, and then tried to back-peddle (or, I should say, since we were rafting, back-paddle) out of it. The guide admitted he didn't go to church much anymore, even though his mother was trying to encourage him to do so, especially now that he had a young daughter. That's when the guide began to back-paddle and attempted to rationalise away his behaviour. He tried to get me to agree with him that the beauty of the Zambesi Gorge was his church, and couldn't he commune with God just as well out on the river as in any building with a bunch of people? I gently and humorously told him that I thought his mother was a pretty wise person in this case. Secondly, over thirty years as a priest hearing people tell me in funeral interviews that for generations their family had been a part of the church, only to hear them back peddle on the last 30 years! Excuses, self-justification, and rationalisation — we've all done it at different times in different ways! God convicts us of a particular sin in our life and of the need for change, and we immediately come up with all kinds of excuses, blaming our weakness either on our genes or on our upbringing or on both nature and nurture. Or we try to rationalise it all away:

“Hey, I admit I'm not perfect as a husband, but no marriage is perfect, right?”

“Okay, I'm no saint, but I'm just as good as the next person!”

“Everybody else is doing it, why shouldn't I?”

“I've got too much on my plate right now. I'll get to that soon, God, maybe next week!”

All of our excuses, however, are just a smokescreen to help cover up the weariness we feel, and to hide the heavy mess of our lives we can no longer handle and bear. The picture we want to present to God, ourselves, and to the world is that “we are just fine — really!” But the truth for most of us most of the time, and for all of us at some time or other is that when we say we are “fine” it often really means we are:

Frazzled,
Insecure,
Neurotic, and
Emotional.

Sooner or later we all have to admit the truth of the apostle Paul's great insight into human nature: we just can't hack it because the good that we would do, we can't; and the evil we don't want to do is exactly what we end up doing over and over again! (Romans 7:15-25). What scripture describes is true for every human experience from something supposedly as simple as eating right and getting

enough exercise, to more complicated matters of interpersonal relationships and our central relationship with God.

Maybe you're like me: as an Anglican I believe that I live by God's grace, but all too often I act, as one theologian said, "like a scout collecting merit badges." My days can quickly get filled up with long lists of duties and "oughts" and "have-to-dos" so that others — my family the congregation I serve, even God — will love me more. Perhaps you, too, resemble that description?

But if we keep on with our own efforts at self-justification we will finally meet our own personal Waterloo of total defeat. If we say "no" to everything and everybody really important, including God, in order to get our "oughts" done, what we end up with is nothing and nobody. Then, as St Paul describes in Romans, chapter seven, we become prisoners of despair, exhausted and overloaded.

Who can save us from this hopeless situation? It is only Jesus, the one who offers the "great invitation" in Matthew, chapter eleven. Our only option is surrender; to give it all up to Jesus; to lay all of our burdens down at the foot of his cross and admit that we can't handle life on our own. When we come to Jesus, take his yoke upon us and find rest, then we become prisoners of hope instead of prisoners of despair. That hope is offered not to those who believe themselves to be super-saints, but, according to Matthew 11:25, to those who are ordinary people, as the phrase "little ones" can be translated. Intimate insider knowledge of the Father is open to the rank and file — to all the "little ones," to you and to me — through faith in Jesus.

Therefore, because we know the heart of the Father we can accept Jesus' gracious invitation. What a relief to finally give in and surrender to the love of God and lay all the weariness and burdens down and then take up Jesus' yoke of discipleship. That's what St Paul discovered; that's there Apostles discovered, that's what the Evangelists discovered, that's what the Early Church Fathers discovered and all the saints of the church through history discovered. All who come to Jesus find what they really need — the rest of service to God and others.

"Take my yoke upon you... and you will find rest for your souls." The paradoxical combination of yoke and rest again shows that life in the kingdom is not a matter of anything goes, which leads to anarchy. The yoke here is a metaphor for discipleship. A yoke is a means of disciplining and organising the strength of oxen for a purpose. What Jesus is talking about in these verses is the yoke of servant discipleship. Oftentimes the best kind of therapy for someone who is overwhelmed with life is for that person to focus instead on the needs of others. That is what God in Christ calls us to.

This yoke of service is easy because it is not a burden of compulsion, but a response of thanksgiving, love, and joy at God's grace that takes away the heaviness of guilt and shame through the forgiveness of sins. This yoke of service is light because it is the burden of freedom. The yoke of discipleship is easy, not because all of the hard things of life will automatically disappear as soon as we believe in Jesus, but because we are yoked together with other disciples. We don't have to carry it on our own. Our river rafting guide, was wrong and her mother was right: we need the body of Christ. We need one another. We're in this thing together. Jesus sends his disciples out, not on their own, he never did but together, two by two. We are to bear one another's burdens. Where two or three are gathered in Jesus' name, there — and only there — does he promise his freeing and comforting presence.

So Jesus wants the yoke — not the cruel joke of an overburdened life — to be on us. This invitation is not burdensome; it is not heavy. It moves us from being prisoners of despair to prisoners of hope. It makes it possible for us to have our strength renewed through the refreshing rest of service to God and others in Jesus' name. Don't put off your response to Jesus' gracious invitation any longer. Come to him, all you who are weary and carrying heavy burdens, and he will give you rest. Take his yoke of discipleship upon you and learn from him; for he is gentle and humble of heart, and you will find rest for your souls. For his yoke is easy, and his burden is light.

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