

Yoked Together For Mission

(Matthew 11:16-19, 25-30, Preached by Cheryl Williams on July 5th, 2020 at Footscray Baptist Church)

The only yokes I am familiar with are the ones you knit into jumpers. I have done a few knitted fair isle yokes in my time.

The yoke of which Jesus speaks is a farming implement which joins two animals together so they can share the workload evenly and perhaps also be more productive. They might be carrying a load or ploughing a field. One may be more experienced than the other and training the younger one up in wearing and working with a yoke.

As he often does, Jesus uses this farming image to speak of a deeper truth. Perhaps the yoke to which he referred was that which the people carried whilst living under Roman oppression, or maybe, he used it to refer to the onerous religious rules and regulations which the ordinary believer was made to carry.

No matter to which he was referring a yoke was carried by two.

But first to the earlier part of our reading.

Jesus finds himself in trouble. In trouble for feasting with tax collectors and sinners. Jesus way or celebrating the kingdom of God amongst the people incurs the indignation and condemnation of the religious people. Jesus notes that John's approach was almost the opposite – not eating or drinking, instead a more austere approach. Either way they both got into trouble – John they said had a demon, Jesus on the other hand hangs out with gluttons and drunkards. Damned if they do, damned if they don't. They are both announcing the good news of God to the people, they both get into trouble – maybe it is not their manner that is the issue, maybe it's the message of God's love, mercy and forgiveness freely given to all, is what is offensive. rather than their way of living it out. John was announcing the Kingdom of Heaven approaching, Jesus was the fulfilment of that.

Jesus' way of announcing the Kingdom of God was to be with the outcasts, those on the edges of society, to celebrate life, to see God's law interpreted by love rather than rules and regulations. Of course, this way of life, would bring him into contact with 'bad company'. It is by being involved in life, in the present moment that Jesus brings both change and criticism. However, this joy and feasting is not about indulgence, it is about celebrating God's presence with all people. The yoke of love demands commitment and solidarity with others, especially those marginalised.

Later in the passage Jesus invites the hearers and us to rest, and also to exchange their yokes for an easier one and a lighter load.

Rest. Rest from physical work. Rest from the burden of religious rules and obligations. Rest from self-righteousness. Rest from doubts, questions, conflicts. Rest from frayed psyches. Rest so we can get on with life, life in all its fullness.

Rest is about acceptance. Rest is about finding ourselves truly at home – fire burning, feet up, slippers on.

Jesus offers another yoke – an easier and lighter one. Jesus invites us to come and learn from him.

This yoke is lighter and easier to use because we share it with Jesus, he is the other one sharing the carrying of the yoke and its load. As we go Jesus will train us up, will equip us, will teach and guide us.

We are yoked with Jesus in service for others. The burden this yoke carries is lighter – gone are all the specific rules, regulations and demands - replaced with freedom, with celebration, with life in abundance, with love.

The learning we will do will be about sharing with and carrying the load for others who are weighed down by all manner of things. It is about being with others - even those on the edges who have been ostracised by those who want conformity.

This learning has a lightness of being, it is about celebrating the life that God gives, it is about celebrating the love that God is. This learning is about turning away from piety and religiosity and turning toward love and inclusion.

Jesus reveals God's heart – which is to stand alongside the ungodly, the glutton, the outcast – to celebrate God's love in the here and now.

So, what does this all mean in a mission sense?

If we are to be disciples of Jesus and continue to follow him in 2020 in the midst of a pandemic, we need to ask a few questions.

Who are those around us weighed down by burdens? How can we come alongside them and share the load?

Who around us needs rest?

Who around us needs joy?

Who around us needs to know they are valued and loved?

Who around us needs to be relieved from a heavy heart and find a lightness of being?

How do we celebrate life and with whom?

With whom shall we yoke ourselves to share their load, to share their joy, to learn from?

Last night in our bible study we discussed the lockdown in the housing estates of Flemington and North Melbourne, a stone's throw from our church. They have just had forced upon them a burden few of us would like or could handle. Together we wondered what we could do to lighten their load, a load they must carry for the sake of us all. We wanted to find a way to share with them our appreciation – so we have created a Facebook post that says:

“To those who live in lockdown suburbs, THANK YOU for all being in the frontline in our fight against Coronavirus! You are our Lockdown Heroes!!!

A small little gesture which we ask you to share, a small way of trying to share the burden of others.

Not sure what is next – huge bags of rice at the fences of the estates?

Jesus invites us to rest. Jesus invites us to take on his yoke and burden that is so much more freeing and celebratory than other things which weigh down.

Jesus' yoke and burden, Jesus' rest - these will turn our attention to that which really matters – other people, the rest of creation and the celebration of unconditional love that is for all in the now. Amen.

References

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