

“FOLLOWING THE KING - 28”

Matthew 11:25-30

Well, unless Esther is particularly good girl – which is, of course, possible – Phil and Helen will be beginning to discover what weariness is all about. And it's not only just the disrupted sleep in the early months of her little life, but as the days and years go by, there will be all kinds of other pressures and anxieties to accompany the many wonderful joys of parenthood. Weariness and worry are increasingly symptomatic of our society, it seems – and not just among parents.

It may be the fact that this congregation has a fairly high proportion of professional and managerial people within it, but it seems that the number of people having to cope with ever increasing amounts of work and ever more pressurised deadlines is rising. (It may, of course, be that they're just not organised enough.) And those pressures and burdens are being applied from every direction – job, family, community, church.

Our levels of anxiety are going up. Our time for relaxation is diminishing. Our medical and psychological difficulties are becoming a problem. We find that we don't eat properly, relax properly, relate properly. There is the fear of what other people – either those above who are applying the pressure, those below who are waiting to step into our shoes, or those of our colleagues who have, like us, been seduced into the pernicious notion that competition is a Good Thing – the fear of what they will be thinking. We compare ourselves with others – and that's something that modern parenting seems particularly prone to: are we giving our children enough opportunities? are we ensuring that they achieve the very highest they can? are we providing them with all the stuff they need to make their way in this world. (If you want a good laugh at such antics – until you realise you're just as bad – read John O'Farrell's novel *May Contain Nuts*.) We worry about whether we are doing enough. We are consumed with self-examination on a spiritual level, too. The things which drive us are guilt and fear - things which are about as far away from the ideals of Christ as it is possible to get. So what are we going to do about it?

Well, without a pretty radical change in our lifestyle – which would almost certainly mean opting out of our jobs – or a pretty radical change in our society – which would almost certainly mean a much louder prophetic call from the churches, I'm not really sure what we're going to do. We seem to have adopted lifestyles that need to be fuelled by the relentless drive for bigger and better, faster and more efficient – more and more like the world around us. And if we want to fund that, we need good jobs with good salaries and good pension prospects. And into this situation of anxiety, of fear, of guilt, comes Jesus. At which point we protest that here comes another burden, another set of expectations, another reason for guilt. Here is the Christian way, with all its calls to greater commitment, more meetings, higher standards, more distinctiveness. That's what we've been hearing from Matthew's Gospel over the past two or three weeks, those of you who have been here. At least, that's what it sounds like, so often. But Jesus appears here to be offering something different.

Let's have a look at what Jesus does offer to those who are feeling trapped in this cycle of anxiety and wearying activity. What he says in these verses is that he has comfort for those who are feeling fed up, bled dry by the demands of the world around them. It's a simple call. It's a call we have heard many, many times. It's another of those biblical phrases that has almost become part of our language. It's a call we have probably resolved to answer many, many times. And he's still making it, I believe. These words – *“Come to me, all you who are weary and burdened, and I will give you rest”* – come at the end of a chapter which we saw began with John the Baptist sitting in prison and wondering if it's all worth it. Maybe he's got it all wrong, he thinks. The pressure has become too much.

But Jesus has many encouraging words about John – most of the first half of the chapter is about that. And then, after a brief denunciation of the unresponsive cities around Galilee, (which we saw last week is actually all about the transforming power of the Kingdom of God) he gives some encouragement to all those who are worn out. He calls to him those who are weary: people who are physically tired by the

daily grind, people who are being worn down by the relentlessness of everyday life. And he calls to those who feel that they are “burdened”. These are the ones who find that there are great demands put on them, who can’t really cope with all that’s expected of them. It’s interesting that the word used here is the one used in *Matthew 23:4*, where Jesus is talking about the “heavy loads” that the Pharisees, the gatekeepers of religion, put on people.

Those “heavy loads” are the expectations of the Pharisees as regards holy living, the burdens of keeping not just the Law of Moses, but the Pharisees’ increasingly intricate interpretations of it. People were just not up to coping with that kind of burden, and Jesus has come to show a better way, a way that allows us to be free of the expectations of others, to be free of the need to be constantly comparing ourselves with others about ourselves or our children, to be free of the agenda set by other people which risks guilt and despair because of our failure to keep to it.

“Come here,” says Jesus, “I can offer you a better way. You don’t need all that kind of thing. Receive my rest.” To be a follower of Christ is not to have to do more things, to be keeping to a check list all the time. To be a follower of Christ is to get more out of life, to turn away from the priorities of the world around and embrace the priorities of Jesus himself. That’s what those hard words back in chapter 10 were all about. But why? What is there that can give us confidence in Jesus as an alternative to anyone else who promises us a break from the grind of everyday life?

1. **ALL THINGS HAVE BEEN COMMITTED TO HIM** (v27)

Jesus has just told his listeners that everything has been committed to him. All that God the Father is and does and knows is shared with Jesus. In other words, Jesus is in total control. Jesus knows the master plan, and he knows the details of it for your life and mine. He knows what you and I need. And what’s more, he knows how you can get it. In fact, he’ll provide it. Not long before, as he stood on the hillside above Galilee and preached *The Sermon On the Mount*, he said this: “Do not worry, saying ‘What shall we eat?’ or ‘What shall we drink?’ or ‘What shall we wear?’ For the pagans run after these things, and your heavenly Father know that you need them.” There’s no need to worry. God knows what you need and you can count on him, you can count on his Son.

Peter writes about it in his first letter – “Cast all your anxiety on him because he cares for you.” Those are wonderful words – but words which are largely ignored by most of God’s people, let alone the world at large. We love to worry and take all the anxiety on ourselves. Some of us thrive on it. But we are commanded to leave it all to Jesus. It’s all been committed to him by the Father. He’s got it under control. It takes a lot of faith and a lot of good sense on our part to believe that and leave it to him, but it works.

2. **HE PROMISES REST** (v28)

When Jesus says something like this, it is no idle commitment: it’s a promise. “I *will* give you rest.” If we stop and think about it, that’s got to be true – not just because Jesus says it, although that’s reason enough; but because we know from our own experience. Those of you who can look back over your lives as God’s people, can see just how Jesus has helped you in the past. We can all recall times when we have been at our wits’ end and yet things have worked out. The more arrogant of us may try to argue that it was our own endeavour that actually brought a resolution to the problem, but deep down we know that it was Jesus. He enabled us to cope. He gave us the strength.

And when he promises us rest, we know that he will deliver the goods if only we are prepared to take the risk of believing him, of taking him at his word. That happens in all kinds of ways – some of which you may be able to identify in your own experience.

- Sometimes we are enabled just to get things into a proper perspective. The things about which we are so worried are actually not that important at all. They'll get done, and if they don't - well, there's no great harm done.
- Sometimes the root causes of the anxiety just disappear - almost miraculously, it seems. The deadline is extended, the solution suddenly becomes crystal clear, the weight is lifted.
- Sometimes someone else steps in and takes over. It's not left to you alone, after all. All it needs is the humility to let someone else get involved.
- Sometimes other things are reorganised to enable you to get on with the one thing that is causing concern, but now you can devote your whole energy to that.

Whatever it is, the problems are receding, the pressure is lifted, Jesus is giving you rest. You can enjoy life once again. After all, he's promised it for those who take him seriously. God's promised it again and again for his people in words like those in *Jeremiah 31:25*, "*I will refresh the weary and satisfy the faint.*" Do you believe that? If you believe – or claim to believe – all the rest, why can't you get your head round that? God doesn't want you to be anxious all the time. He doesn't want you to be worn out and ground down. He created you to enjoy life, so believe that you can, and that God will make it possible for you. Accept his rest. As someone once said, "*If you think you're indispensable, walk home through the graveyard!*"

3. **HE IS GENTLE** (v29)

Part of the great joy of turning to Jesus for help in such situations is discovering that he makes no further demands on those who cannot cope. When the heat is on, Jesus won't turn it up further. "*I am gentle*", he says – and, again, we've got to believe it. In the next chapter, in a quite different context, Matthew applies to Jesus the words of Isaiah: "*A bruised reed he will not break and a smouldering wick he will not snuff out.*" This Jesus is the one who saw Jerusalem and the parlous state it was in, then wept and said that he wished he could just cuddle the people to himself, like a hen gathering her chicks.

If you ever play football with someone who has played at a high level, you'll soon discover that all those apparently friendly gestures that we see on TV – helping someone up after a foul, patting someone on the head, putting your arm round an opponent – are not as friendly as they seem. There's a fair bit of wrenching and twisting going on a lot of the time. But when Jesus reaches out to help us, it's pure gentleness. He doesn't want to add to the hurt, he wants to heal. The embrace of the Lord is refreshing and reviving. He loves you and has no interest at all in forcing you into yet more difficult situations. When you feel you're at the bottom, you can feel you're being pushed down even further with fear and guilt, but Jesus reaches out to pull you gently up. Sometimes, when you're feeling right at the end of your tether, try imagining the arms of Jesus around you. Don't even try to pray: just be aware of the presence of Jesus, the gentle sense of his nearness. If you do believe he's real, then experience that reality in your situation.

4. **HIS YOKE IS EASY** (v30)

Now, all of this doesn't mean that there's no need for any commitment to Jesus. I'm not trying to sell you what Bonhoeffer called "*cheap grace*". Jesus still wants us to believe in him and to express that belief in commitment to him. He's been making that very clear in the last two chapters of this Gospel. What he's saying is that commitment to him should make things easier, not harder. That's what he saw the Pharisees' yoke doing. The phrase "*the yoke of the Law*" was a commonplace one in Jesus' time. God's people submitted themselves to it and hoped it would help them – but, in fact, it was a hard yoke to bear, because there was so much about it that was not really of God.

We often have this idea, don't we, of a yoke as being a burdensome device. It wasn't until I was preparing this that I realised that a yoke is actually intended to make the burden easier to carry. It spreads

the load across the shoulders rather than pulling directly on the arms. A yoke is a device for making burdens easier to carry, not harder. Jesus says here that *his "burden is light"* – presumably compared to the heavy burden of legalistic observance, of constantly comparing yourself with others and trying to live according to their agenda. And not only is his burden lighter – because, after all, he has dealt with the most difficult bits of it by dying on the cross – but the yoke with which we are to carry the burden is an easy one. Jesus wants to make life easier, more enjoyable, not harder and more of a drudge.

If you can believe in what Jesus says, if you can believe that he really does want you to get the most out of life, if you can believe that his death and resurrection were intended to enable us to discover a better way of living than that of the world around us, then you should be able to believe that he really can give you rest. And if you believe that, then you should be prepared to come to him as he calls you and reach out to receive the promised rest.

Of course, if your agenda is still very much dictated by the world around you, then it's not going to be easy – in fact, I'd say that it will be impossible. If you are wanting to saddle yourself with the burdens of other people's expectations, other people's priorities, other people's demands, then all of this will be a closed book to you. But I believe that all of us, whatever the pressure we feel we are under, whatever the difficulties we think we're facing, can experience the rest of Jesus Christ if we really want to. After all, he's promised it to you!

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Questions for discussion

1. Would you agree that life seems more pressurised these days? Why/why not?
2. What are the kinds of pressure that we find ourselves living with? How do we cope with them?
3. What are the extra pressures we might encounter as Christians?
4. How can we achieve a balance between care-lessness and responsibility?
5. In what ways has Jesus helped you with your anxieties?
6. How can wholehearted commitment to Jesus make things easier?