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Dear Friends,

Come to me you who are weary, and I will give you rest... for my yoke is light (Matthew 11.16-)

I begin with a 'Thank You' to all of you for your warm welcome into the Parish and for all the messages, cards and gifts I have received. I have been totally overwhelmed by your kindness and generosity. I am overjoyed and look forward as we journey together navigating the difficulties and delights of the seasons of life.

We begin our journey in a strange season indeed. We have been living with uncertainty for what feels like an eternity, and we will continue to do so for quite some time, but things are beginning to change as we look to what is to become a different way of life – or the 'new normal' as many are saying. Lockdown fatigue has been evident for weeks, with light relief as restrictions are lifted, but many are exhausted and it appears that some have almost forgotten the threat of Covid whilst others' lives are still bound by it.



Belinda and Hector

Our church doors are now open for private prayer and we are yet to see what will happen as we continue to Zoom and YouTube worship – which has the ability to reach those who would never have set foot inside a church. These new forms of worship are sustaining us as a community of faith in this strange season.

Liturgically, we are in what some call the green season – ordinary time – a time to grow in faith. It's a curious term because there is nothing ordinary about the time in which we find ourselves, but we can always be surprised by the extraordinary breaking through. It's extraordinary to think that last weekend I was ordained as deacon, as I come to serve you as a very green curate.

There is time set aside for retreat prior to ordination. This would normally be a time when you gather with fellow candidates at some idyllic setting to pray, reflect, study and eat together. It's a time to prepare yourselves spiritually for the gifts that you are about to receive. I have to say I was very sceptical about an online Zoom retreat; I think many of us find Zoom quite exhausting. There is no replacement for that physical presence but I was pleasantly surprised. Maybe like you, I am getting used to this new way of working. Our retreat guide was Bishop Frank Griswold, of the Episcopal Church in Philadelphia, whose credentials were certainly impressive having been in ministry for 57 years longer than I have been alive! The Bishop provided us with real nuggets of wisdom. He spoke about prayer, the sacraments, and discernment of spirit. The last brought discussion on how we understand God's will as his love for us and how we understand sin as in opposition of that will.

In our first reading today, St Paul writes from Corinth to the early Church in Rome. He reminds us we all do things we wish we hadn't done; we all sin, it's part of the human condition. For too long, society has promoted self-reliance which leads us to unhealthy burdening of ourselves and others. This then can become the focus of our attention and energy. As Christians we are called to rely on Jesus but this isn't always easy. If living with Covid has taught us one thing, it is how

much we rely on each other. I am reminded of a story that Bishop Frank shared with us from his time in the Benedictine community. One of the novice monks was totally obsessed with his own failings. He asked the abbot how he should relieve this burden. The abbot smiled and said “only you are worried about your sin”. St Paul encourages the Christian community in Rome to rely on faith, through Jesus, to strengthen a community under threat, reminding them that Jesus has already provided forgiveness of sin. Forgiveness is the ultimate act of love, love begets love, compassion begets compassion, and generosity begets generosity.

Many of us on the retreat spoke of the deep pain we all feel not being able to receive Holy Communion. Bishop Frank responded saying maybe this is a time of prayer and a season of scripture for we receive Jesus in word as well as in body. How many of us had thought about that recently? We hear people say they do not believe in God, yet they turn to prayer in time of crisis. It is an active cry for help which is embedded deep within us. When we are stripped back of all our wants and desires we instinctively turn to God our Creator. Prayer changes us on the inside and praying the scripture provides comfort and encouragement for many. Praying and studying the scripture can offer us new insights into our own humanity and the world around us. Fear and anxiety are always with us but today, in our gospel reading, we hear those beautiful words as Jesus invites us to come to him as he will provide us the rest our souls need.

Matthew’s gospel begins with a term he uses frequently “this generation”, inviting the hearers to look into ourselves. The gospel then uses the example of children in a sort of make-believe game where each camp complains against the other. I find myself guilty of this whenever I go shopping, if somebody doesn't social distance. I get extremely cross upon my return home. I complain to my boys “why can't people just stick to the rules?” I say, not considering what they may be experiencing or feeling. Jesus's words can help us locate ourselves in relation to each other and to the community to which we belong.

Some scholars suggest that in this context the law is a heavy burden for many. Following Jesus isn't easy either but the burden is much lighter if we take on his yoke. If we allow ourselves to learn from him and follow his example, we receive a source of refreshment and rest in our spirit. We also can take the example from the lowly and meek who shall be lifted, a principle mirrored in the Jewish and Christian faiths. This sharing of his yoke requires us to turn to Jesus to rely on him and this we do through prayer through our relationship with him. This is what all people are invited to do. Turning to Jesus was something our confirmation group explored recently, for confirmation, like ordination, are times when we are in a sense reaffirming of our baptismal vows.

Jesus uses the image of the yoke – something that was used to bind up oxen together to farm the land – an image with which the people of that time would have identified. The yoke image has also been related to the difficulty in keeping the Messianic law and the oppressive regime of Rome. Taking a positive view, a yoke is something which gives direction, it keeps us on track and in the sharing we can move forward together. So we are encouraged to take his yoke upon us and in doing so we receive rest, Jesus’ gift to us. This invitation is to all people, those who are willing to be open to his teaching and his ways, which we know involves reaching out to those in need and those on the margins of society. Many of you have been doing this with great vigour indeed. Jesus is the wisdom of God and he has revealed this wisdom in a very new way. Through faith in Jesus we are invited into life in its fullness not a life of restraint where our minds are closed to the new possibilities that are offered to us, to the ‘new normal’ which we are being offered.

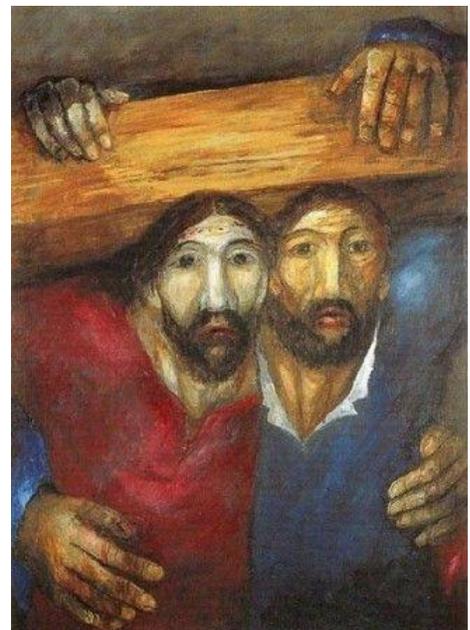


Image by Sieger Koder. See also poem at end.

I have heard many people talk about us getting back to normal. I have also heard many people say that they don't want life to be as it was before. I wonder what we have really learnt? How are we as a society going to unburden ourselves? How are we together going to lighten the load? Maybe it's more a question of not thinking about what is normal but focusing on the new as we enter a new way of living? Through Christ all is made new, after all we, too, are called to be people who live the resurrection hope.

There is no doubt that the repercussions of Covid will continue for many years, not only the economic impact but the emotional impact. This burden will be with us for quite some time so let us pray for ourselves and our communities for strength to continue working together in this season of prayer. Let us take comfort, and learn and share in this season of the word. Let us take his yoke upon us for it is easy and the burden is light.

Yours in Christ

Belinda

A poem from the Daughters of St Paul Catholic Community of Religious Women

'May they give you rest'

Travellers on the same road
under the one same load
body upholding body
shoulder to shoulder
Cheek by cheek
twinned as one

Carrying the same weight
they become one
their eyes fixed in one direction
they strive onwards
towards the same goal

There is a need to stay close
to one another.
Synchronising their pace,
gaining strength-
the beam on their shoulders is heavy
any shift in weight
any disharmony
will become them both.

Together as one
Is it by love,
Friendship,
Solidarity,
Or simply chance?

Whatever brought them close
is irrelevant
under the same weight
they are one