



## Unforced rhythms of grace

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*Genesis 24:34-38, 42-49, 58-67*

*Romans 7:15-25*

*Matthew 11:16-19, 25-30*

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I was thinking about the story of Rebekah becoming the bride of Isaac while I was cleaning the shower yesterday, as you do. I'm not sure whether she ever had to clean the shower or its equivalent, but I was reflecting on how much choice she had in the matter, just what she made of Abraham's servant's certainty that she was God's choice for Isaac, and how she felt leaving her home and family, and travelling far off to be married to a distant relative and make her home there. At least we're told she had her nurse and maids with her – perhaps they cleaned the shower! Rebekah is asked whether she will go with the servant, and her response "I will" shows a trust, a willingness to embrace an unknown future, yet a future held within the promises of her relatives' God who will become her God.

Contrast Rebekah's attitude with that of those in our Gospel passage. Jesus talks about 'this generation' who wouldn't receive the ministry of John the Baptist, and nor would they receive the ministry of Jesus himself – he says they were just like children who weren't happy, whatever game was being offered to play. They criticised John the Baptist for his ascetic lifestyle and rigorous teaching, but then they criticized Jesus for the fact that he enjoyed life, and ate and drank with tax-collectors and sinners. It was a no-win situation for them, and they ended up just feeling frustrated and disgruntled, impossible to please, and not willing to see God at work among them even when the evidence was before their very eyes.

I wonder whether 'this generation', our own, is so different, where we are so often unwilling to commit to anything, overwhelmed with so much choice that we choose nothing, spiritually hungry but so reliant on our own human knowledge and capacities that we are not open to divine wisdom from beyond ourselves.

Notice Jesus' words: 'Yet wisdom is vindicated by her deeds' (Mt 11:19). Jesus takes on here the persona of Wisdom, the mysterious female figure of the Wisdom literature of the Hebrew Scriptures, who reveals the mysteries of God, interprets the Torah, the law, and calls disciples.

Jesus goes on to claim that he is the one who can reveal God and the truth about God to people, but not just head knowledge about God, rather that deep knowing of God that is a relationship of intimacy and choice. He claims to be in a privileged relationship as Son to Father, but a relationship that he is willing to share with us, we too can become children of God.

Jesus then issues the beautiful invitation: 'Come to me, all you that are weary and carrying heavy burdens, and I will give you rest. Take my yoke upon you and learn from me; for I am humble and gentle in heart, and you will find rest for your souls. For my yoke is easy and my burden is light'.

We think of a yoke as a weighty, burdensome thing – I'm reminded of the yokes I saw on the water buffalo carrying their loads in India. But the Wisdom tradition (Sirach 6:24ff; 51:26ff) talked of the yoke of the law as a positive thing, that God designed the law as something holy and good that would fit well on our shoulders. It was suited to us, it would help us to live a lifestyle in human society according to the values of God's reign. This is something that Paul in his letter to the Romans fundamentally affirms: that God's law was a gift, that it is holy and just and good (Rom. 7:12). There is not a problem with God's law, rather the problem lies with us!

We human beings have been unable to keep the law under our own steam, we throw the yoke off our shoulders, rebel and want to do our own thing. The law which was meant to be a good guide for us for life in community, ended up becoming a burden which we could not live up to, something that weighed us down and crushed us, weakened by our propensity to know what we should do, but then to go and do the opposite (see Romans 7). Jesus knew too that it was all too easy for us to use the law as a way of clobbering other people, of 'tying up heavy burdens, hard to bear, and laying them on the shoulders of others' (Mt 23:4), distorting the image of a yoke that fits well, into a burden on our backs that crushes our spirit.

Rather Jesus suggests that we take *his* yoke upon us, that we be yoked to him as disciple to master, just like the younger animal yoked to an older more experienced animal can learn how to plough. Yes, it takes a lifetime perhaps to learn to walk in step with him but as we are yoked to Jesus, disciple to master, we will learn to be like him, we learn from his gentleness and humility, we seek to model our lives and attitudes on his.

We recall that Jesus' ministry was one of *lifting* the burdens<sup>1</sup> that weighed people down, and we seek to be those who lift burdens off also, rather than imposing them, so that others may find with us freedom and rest.

Jesus promises to give us rest for our souls, a way of living that no longer leads to frustration or feeling burdened, but a peaceful way of walking with Christ along the journey of life, where we can rest in his love.

The Greek word is *anapausis*, we hear the word 'pause' in it, it carries the idea of an oasis. We find a pause, an oasis in Christ.

Just as in the Genesis story, God rested on the Sabbath day, and creation rested in God, so we are called to rest in Christ and in the love of God in Christ. And we know too that in times of struggle that Christ will carry us, take the weight of our neediness, just as he did supremely at the cross.

We live in a world that is fast-paced, and we can often feel like we're overwhelmed, weighed down with the burden of our concerns for ourselves or for others, submerged by the deluge of information we're constantly receiving about our world and its problems and feeling powerless to act. And we can feel this as a church community too. A wise head has commented: 'People who come to Jesus find themselves with other people who are worn out, under pressure and at the limits of their patience and therefore not always easy companions'<sup>2</sup>. In this context, Jesus offers us rest, rest in the confidence of our relationship with him, a relationship of trust and rest between disciple and master.

Eugene Peterson who wrote The Message paraphrase of the Scriptures, one of the most recent published in 2002, offers the invitation of our Gospel passage in a way which I find both challenging and encouraging.

'Are you tired? Worn out? Burned out on religion? Come to me.

Get away with me and you'll recover your life.

I'll show you how to take a real rest. Walk with me and work with me – watch how I do it. Learn the unforced rhythms of grace.

I won't lay anything heavy or ill-fitting on you.

Keep company with me and you'll learn to live freely and lightly'.

May we seek to learn the unforced rhythms of grace in our lives as we walk yoked with Christ this week. Amen.

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<sup>1</sup> Brendan Byrne, *Lifting the Burden: Reading Matthew's Gospel in the Church Today*. Liturgical Press: Minnesota, 2004, p.98

<sup>2</sup> Brown, Rosalind. *Fresh from the Word: a preaching companion for Sundays, Holy Days and Festivals*, years A, B & C. Canterbury Press: Norwich, 2016, p.84.