

Sermon for Proper 9A

The Text: Matthew 11:28-30

Rest and recuperation

Something strange has happened in the way we live our lives.

Once upon a time most people spent most of their lives doing things that were physical—working the land with hand tools; running the household with great effort; making things with hard physical labour.

We can think of God's word to Adam after he was thrown out of the Garden of Eden: *Cursed is the ground because of you; through painful toil you will eat of it all the days of your life. By the sweat of the brow you will eat food, until you return to the ground.*

People would work hard all day, and by the end of the day they were exhausted. People would work hard all their lives, and by the time they were old, their bodies were worn out.

Then people started to get cleverer. People invented all sorts of machines that took over many of the hard tasks - machines for the household, and for working the land, and for manufacturing things in the factories.

I think that most of you would agree that our lives today are much easier than the lives of previous generations. Much of the burden of hard physical labour has been lifted off our shoulders.

But then something strange happened. We have realised that we need physical activity. We need physical exercise to keep us healthy. We need to do things that make us tired.

So what did we do? We invented some more machines, machines that we use to exercise, and we put them in gymnasiums, and sometimes in our own homes, and we use them, not to take away the physical efforts of life, but to give us the sort of physical effort that will help us to stay healthy.

Our text today talks about hard work, about the burdens of life, that leave us exhausted, worn out. It talks about relief from your burdens, and rest, and refreshment, and recuperation.

But then it also talks about a new burden, a new exercise that you need for the good of your health.

Jesus says: *Come to me all you who are weary and weighed down with heavy burdens.* Jesus promises: *Come to me, and I will give you rest, and refreshment.* But then he challenges us: *And now pick up my yoke, and learn from me.* Learn how to live a life that is healthy and strong.

What are the burdens that weigh people down? What makes you tired?

Do you get tired physically? For all the labour-saving devices that we have, life can still be physically demanding. At the end of the day we may feel tired and worn out.

Our bodies have their limits, and when we have been doing physical work, we reach the point where our bodies tell us. If we are ill, if we are carrying injuries, then we become even more aware of our physical limits. We feel tired. We need rest.

As you grow old, you become more and more aware of the loss of physical strength. You cannot do the same tasks you used to do. You appreciate rest and quietness more and more. But there are other kinds of burdens and other kinds of weariness.

Today, when we spend less time and effort on physical work, our levels of mental stress have grown at least as much. As life has become more and more complicated, our emotional stress keeps going higher. We talk about the pressures of life. There are pressures all around us—we are expected to succeed, to be able to manage new tasks, new technology, and we often get to the point when we cry out: *I can't cope with it all. Give me a break.*

We have financial pressures—all the things that we want to get, the security we hope for. We struggle to make ends meet.

We have relationship pressures. We want to love and be loved. So often our relationships become difficult and we carry disappointments and regrets.

There are pressures within us. We want to be successful. We want to be able to manage. We want to be independent. But again and again we are reminded of our own limitations. We feel that we have failed.

But the greatest pressure, and our greatest failures, are spiritual.

If we are honest, we know that we are not the people that we would like to be. We do not live the life that we know that we should live.

I know that I am not the person that God wants me to be, and expects me to be, and commands me to be. I know I should obey my God, and I should live according to the life that God has set up for me. But I don't. I fail. I disobey God, and I break God's commands. The greatest burden we carry is our moral failure.

We try to get around it and think that as long as we do our best, that should be OK. But it does not work. We carry a great and terrible burden of guilt. We have sinned against our God.

If we think back to Paul's words in Romans 7, it is one of the most honest cases of facing the guilt within our human hearts: *I am a prisoner to the law of sin which is at work in my body. What a wretched man I am!* We can hear his frustration, his anger, almost despair. If we are honest, we know that we all share in the same sort of struggle.

I once shared this passage with a person who was struggling with addictions—gambling addiction, alcohol and drug addiction, sexual addiction. This person wanted to break free, but the reality is that an addiction keeps grabbing you and dragging you back.

Sin is an addiction. We don't want to sin – but we do. Those desires to do something, even if we know that it is hurtful—they keep grabbing us and dragging us down.

That is what Paul is speaking about, and we feel it too: *I don't understand what I am doing, and why I keep on doing it. I don't do what I want to do, but I do what I hate. I know that God's law is good, and I want to do what is right. But sin is living in me, and I keep on giving way to sin. I have the desire to do what is right, but I do not have the strength to carry it out.I don't do the good I want to do, but I do the evil I don't want to do.*

We hear his great frustration, and we share that frustration. *Who will rescue me from this body of death?*

But Paul also has an answer. Paul knows where to go for relief, for release, for rest. *Who will rescue me from this body of death? Thanks be to God who delivers me through Jesus Christ our Lord!*

That is also the answer that Jesus himself has given. That is the invitation that Christ gives to us: *Come to me, all you who are weary and burdened. Come to me and I will give you rest.*

One of the great gifts of God is rest. Rest is peace, relief, refreshment. When we have rest, our bodies, and our minds, and our spirits, have the opportunity to recover, to gather strength again.

When we are tired, we just want to stop, to put our feet up, to crawl into bed, to go to sleep. When we are rested, we are ready to start again. Our energy and our strength have returned.

We have been made in a way so that while we rest we are made strong. Our bodies and our minds are refreshed and rejuvenated. If we are sick, often a good rest is the best medicine, so that your bodies can heal themselves, and overcome fevers and infections.

There is a beautiful psalm verse: "In vain you rise early and stay up late, toiling for food to eat—for God grants sleep to those he loves" (Psalm 127:2)

Jesus Christ offers rest. But now it is rest that brings health and recovery from our spiritual weariness, from our burdens of sin and guilt. Jesus Christ offers to take our burden. Jesus Christ has taken the burden of our sin and guilt all the way to the Cross. He has carried that burden and he has paid for that guilt with his own life. So Jesus says to us that we do not have to try to prove your own goodness—not to God, nor to ourselves, nor to anyone else. Jesus takes away that pressure.

And Jesus tells us that as we come to him in repentance, he forgives us. He takes away our sin. He sets us free from the burden of guilt, and that terrible frustration when we can never avoid following our human sinful desires.

Jesus gives us that deep rest and peace, for we know that our sins are forgiven. With that rest we are refreshed, rejuvenated, recuperated. We are ready to live again, with the strength and energy that comes from God's Spirit.

But just when we think that all of our problems have been solved, Jesus comes back and says: But now I have something for you to carry. *Take my yoke on upon you.* A yoke is the big heavy beam of wood that was placed over the shoulders of a team of oxen, so that they could pull heavy loads. Jesus is putting a load on us.

Is it easy to be a Christian, to follow Jesus, to live for Christ? No, because Jesus also has very high expectations on us. Jesus calls on us to be totally dedicated to our God, to serve God with our bodies, minds and spirits. That is demanding, and it can mean a huge effort, a deep sacrifice.

Has Jesus lifted off one burden, and replaced it with another? Yes—and no! Jesus takes away the real burdens that wear us out and threaten to destroy us. But remember how we spoke about another sort of effort, about work, about exercise, which is part of healthy living that creates a healthy tiredness.

That is the sort of task and challenge that Jesus gives us. Jesus says: *Take my yoke upon you and learn from me, for I am gentle and humble in heart, and you will find rest for your souls. For my yoke is easy, and my burden is light.*

If you look at a yoke, you will see that it is not meant to be carried alone—it is always carried by a pair of oxen. Jesus tells you, I am giving you a burden, but I am not expecting to carry it by yourself. I am not plonking it on top of you to weigh you down and oppress you and destroy you.

No, I am gentle and humble in heart. I am giving you something that is going to help you and build you up.

Jesus says that he is carrying that burden with us. *Learn from me.* When you share the tasks and challenges of Christian life, you are sharing in the life of Jesus Christ. You are sharing the life that comes from God. That is a privilege, not a burden. And it is a challenge that makes you stronger, that builds up your faith. The more you respond, the more you grow, and you appreciate more and more what God is doing through you and what God is doing in you.

With Jesus Christ, this yoke is easy, this burden is not too heavy. As you commit to God's tasks, yes, you do get tired. You know that you have been putting your body and mind and soul into it. But it is a healthy tiredness. It is the tiredness that brings refreshment and new life.

Until you finally have finished all of your tasks. Then you have a new rest and an eternal peace. Then you are living in the peace of your heavenly Father. For Christ has given you the rest for your souls. Amen.