

A couple was going out for the evening. The last thing they did was to put the cat out. The taxi arrived, and as the couple walked out of the house, the cat shoots back in. So the husband goes back inside to chase it out. The wife, not wanting it known that the house would be empty, explained to the taxi driver "He's just going upstairs to say goodbye to my mother." A few minutes later, the husband got into the taxi and said, "Sorry I took so long, the stupid thing was hiding under the bed and I had to poke her with a coat hanger to get her to come out!"

Things are not always as they seem!

BCP: Hear the "comfortable words":

'Come to me', he says, 'all you who labour and are burdened, and I will give you rest.'

There is a great paradox in this famous saying of Jesus. Burdens are, by definition, burden-some: they are heavy and weighty. And as for yokes – well, I can imagine the strain across your whole body and I think I would be very pleased and relieved to lay down a yoke. And yet, Jesus invites us not only to take his yoke upon ourselves, but bizarrely tells us that his yoke is easy and his burden is light. However, there is more to these words than first meets the eye.

We need to realize that the rabbis of this period in history routinely referred to the responsibilities of living by God's Law as a "yoke" -- as something people took on themselves to steer and guide them down God's paths in life.

However, alongside the written Law was something called the 'oral law', the tradition of the elders. Part of this was very practical: it was to explain and define what the written Law meant, but over time it grew to contain of thousands upon thousands of rules and regulations, and the Pharisees gave equal authority to both the Law of Moses and the oral law. But for Jesus, the oral law, these man-made rules as he called them, were a burden and a yoke, grievously heavy to bear. It had transformed religion from God's good design for fullness of life to a legalistic all-encompassing rule-book. And you couldn't see the wood for the trees.

The Pharisees and their complicated interpretations of the Law had managed to turn people away from the fulfilment of life with God.

So Jesus was returning to the simplicity of God's original Covenant and Law, to give his disciples what they needed to steer and guide their path easily, and by following Jesus' way they would find peace, rest, and refreshment.

Near the end of his life, the exiled reformer Martin Bucer (16th century) expressed his fervent prayer that the Strasbourg church "would willingly accept [the Lord's] most easy yoke, i.e. his discipline, without which the church will certainly not be able to last." The "discipline of Christ," he continued, consisted in this,

that all the members of Christ recognize and embrace each other most intimately and lovingly, and that they build one another up in the knowledge of and obedience to the son of God most zealously and efficaciously, and that the ministers of the churches know, care for and tend the individual sheep of Christ, as the chief pastor Christ set the example. In countless places in Scripture, the Lord described and set forth for us this [discipline]

Jesus' own life is an excellent example. In the garden of Gethsemane, faced with imminent arrest, torture and execution, he did not want to have to go through it. This is a perfectly normal human reaction to the threat of death. Jesus begged his Father to spare him going through this appalling ordeal. "Father, if it is possible, let this cup pass from me," he prayed but then, at the end of his prayer, said: "Nevertheless, not as I will, but as you will." (Matthew 26:39). The Father was silent and his will was clear. Jesus should face what is coming. And, when sometime later, Jesus rises from his prayer, he is a very different person. From that moment on and for the rest of his Passion experience he reveals nothing but quiet dignity and strength in the face of all kinds of abuse and humiliations.

Here we might say we have the two sides of the Gospel coming together. On the one hand, Jesus makes that absolute and total surrender of

himself into God's hands but, at the same time, experiences the "rest" that comes to those who "labour and are overburdened".

Whatever demands Jesus may make on us, he wants to be at all times truly a source of comfort, of consolation and of forgiveness and reconciliation. Whatever demands life may be making on us, he is with us. When we are in difficulties and pain, we can ask him to take them away. He may not always do so but we can expect him to restore our peace. Sometimes he will give us peace not from our pain but within our pain.

Acknowledge dependency!

Somewhere in the growing up process we exchange a child's dependence on people for an adult's dependence on things, like money, alcohol, success and influence. But these props are notoriously fickle and the adult world is often plagued by stress and anxiety. Someone has said that "our age shall be known, not as the age of freedom, but as the age of anxiety. We are anxious about many things: having enough money, having good enough health, being secure and safe." Indeed, with the economic downturn of the last few years and our struggle to make sense of terrorism, we may feel, like Paul in Romans 7, "anything but free."

Only a return to humility can restore our lost innocence and our lost paradise., that honest humility that accepts our creature-status, our status as children before God.

By talking about yokes, Jesus is using an illustration common in his time, but not so common in ours, at least in our part of the world. A yoke is usually made out of wood. It fits across the shoulders of the animal or person who is using it. The purpose of the yoke is to harness the power of the animal to do the work required of it. Yokes are also used by people to carry water or other things.

Justin Martyr, writing in the second century, said that when Jesus was working as a carpenter, one of the things he made was yokes. Perhaps we can imagine Jesus making these wooden yokes meant to join pairs of animals together. Of course, the carpenter would want to make the yoke so that it would fit just right – not rub or be rough on the animals, but

something that would truly help the animals bear their burdens, pull together, be more efficient as a team than either would be alone. We imagine Jesus the carpenter, sanding down rough spots, fitting the yoke, checking it, making it just right for the job – a perfect fit.

Jesus invites us to take a yoke just like this – made exactly for us by someone who understands what it means to bear burdens, someone who knows us each by name, knows our gifts and our needs, who does not want us to be wearied or weighed down. Jesus offers us a yoke, made by his own labour and love, made perfectly for us. And that's not all; he offers himself as our partner in the yoke, the one who will help us bear, pull, carry – whatever we are called to do.

Perhaps one thing that keeps us from taking Jesus up on his invitation is that we don't want to need help. We want to be strong and capable, and we think keeping our problems to ourselves, trying to do things alone, trying to muscle our way through anxiety by ourselves is proof of our strength and ability.

Look you! Deuteronomy 22 directs that one should not yoke an ox together with an ass to a plough!

Jesus longs to give us rest from all the troubles and hardships and burdens we carry. All we need to do is give up our burdens, turn everything we carry over to Christ, and he will help us: a beautiful, utterly simple invitation. But we, like St Paul, “do not understand what we do! For what we want to do we do not do, but what we hate to do!”

We are all broken, all flawed, and all perfectly worthy, because of Jesus Christ, to receive God's love and care. One of the burdens we can give up is the burden of thinking we need to do things on our own, that we need to match some picture of perfection, and that otherwise Jesus will not want to be yoked to us.

Don't be an ass! Let Jesus be your partner in your yoke!

I found this story from an unknown source, which illustrates the possibilities of flawed vessels in the right yoke!

A water bearer in India had two large pots, each hung on one end of a pole that he carried across his neck. One of the pots had a crack in it. At the end of the long walk from the stream on the master's house, the cracked pot arrived only half full, while the other pot was perfect and always delivered a full portion of water. For two years this went on daily, with the bearer delivering only one and a half pots full of water to his master's house.

Of course, the perfect pot was proud of its accomplishments, perfect to the end for which it was made. But the poor cracked pot was ashamed of its own imperfection, and miserable that it was able to accomplish only half of what it had been made to do. After two years of what it perceived to be bitter failure, it spoke to the water bearer one day by the stream. "I am ashamed of myself, and I want to apologize to you." "Why?" asked the bearer, "What are you ashamed of?"

"I have been able, for these past two years, to deliver only half my load because this crack in my side causes water to leak out all the way back to your master's house. Because of my flaws, you have to do all this work, and you don't get full value from our efforts," the pot said.

The water bearer felt sorry for the cracked pot, and in his compassion he said, "As we return to the master's house I want you to notice the beautiful flowers along the path." Indeed, as they went up the hill, the old cracked pot took notice of the sun warming the beautiful wild flowers on the side of the path, and this cheered it some. But at the end of the trail, it still felt sad because it had leaked out half its load, and so again the pot apologized to the bearer for its failure.

The bearer said to the pot, "Did you notice that there were flowers only on your side of the path, but not on the other pot's side? That's because I have always known about your flaw, and I took advantage of it. I planted flower seeds on our side of the path, and every day while we walk back from the stream, you've watered them. For two years I have been able to pick beautiful flowers to decorate my master's table. Without you being just the way you are, he would not have this beauty to grace his house.

"We all have our own unique flaws. We are all cracked pots. In God's great web of life, nothing goes to waste. Don't be afraid of your flaws. Acknowledge them, and you too can be the cause of beauty. Know that in our weakness we find our strength.