

Proper 9 year A 2020

Sometimes I read the Propers (that is, the readings proper for the day), and think 'there is nothing here that I think I can work with'; but sometimes I think 'why are all four readings just wonderful starting off points for a homily' – because then you don't know where to start – and today is one of those days. It is like standing in front of a sumptuous buffet and not knowing which dish to taste first – but you have to make a choice! So, the Gospel reading for today! 'Take my yoke upon you, for my yoke is easy and my burden is light'. Words I say every time I put a stole around my neck prior to a communion service. Does that mean that being a Christian is easy, that there is no effort involved? I don't think Jesus is saying that at all. He has already told his disciples what life will be like – 'I am sending you out like sheep amongst wolves' (10.16), and warned them 'Since John the Baptist came . . . the Kingdom of Heaven has been subjected to violence and the violent are taking it by storm' (11.12). So how can the burden be light, how can he offer rest, when so much is asked of his followers? But note that the rest he offers is not for the body but for the soul. Soul-sick weariness does not come from work, as such, but from work to which we are ill-suited, work extracted under compulsion or motivated by fear, work that seems futile; there is weariness also that comes from having nothing at all to do that has any real meaning - writing these sermons has helped me during lock-down to avoid that, but I expect most of us have, from time to time, felt that way. The easy yolk which Jesus offers means having something to do that truly matters, a purpose

that demands your attention and commitment, your best efforts – then it doesn't feel like a yoke, more like a leading rein – and look who has the rein in His hand. Now your soul can be at ease, at rest, because you know who is in charge in your life.

Those early Christians in Rome would have longed for that. This rather complicated reading we have today doesn't seem to offer rest – it is a battle ground, a battleground between sin and righteousness, between good and evil. What would those listening to the letter being read have made of it? Imagine you are a slave, not to sin, but to your slave master's every command. As a follower of Christ you find the things you have to do repugnant, but there is nothing you can do about it – 'grin and bear it' hardly touches the surface. Paul develops his argument about the battle ground in terms of slavery, a concept, which we saw last week, with which all his listeners would have been very familiar. He writes in the first person singular – although the 'I' might not be Paul himself – this is not a public confession – but 'I' could be the person listening – 'yes, that is how it is for me. 'I' am constrained from doing what I want to do, 'I' am forced by sin (my master) to do things I don't want to do. 'I' am captive to the law of sin (my master) in my body, but in my spirit I have been rescued by God through Jesus Christ my true Lord'. Christian slaves constrained by non-Christian slave owners from doing right continue to do wrong, to do what they hate, to break the new law they have discovered. They have to live with the tension that brings – but in their house church they find

acceptance, understanding, solidarity, the recognition that everyone is, one way or another, in the same boat.

Is that what the church, the body of Christ, looks like today? Acceptance, understanding, solidarity, recognition? Or are we still playing the game of 'us and them'? Look back to the Gospel reading and Jesus' words about 'this generation', and especially his words about John the Baptist. The two of them could not have been more different. John, the bug eating wilderness prophet, Jesus always ready to have a good meal with all kinds of company: John who wore scratchy clothes as a form of self-penance (today we would call it a hair shirt), and Jesus willing to invoke his Father's power to keep the wine flowing at a wedding feast; John who calls his listeners 'a brood of vipers', whilst Jesus tells his listeners to 'rejoice and be glad' (5.11) – and yet they are both rejected, one for being austere and judgemental, the other for being welcoming and forgiving. John came 'neither eating nor drinking', and the authorities (the wise, the knowledgeable, the powerful) did not care for his style at all. Jesus came, willing to dance (but not to their tune), and they called him a glutton and a drunkard (an Old Testament expression of someone worthy of death). Is that where we are today? Do we find God's agenda both too conservative and too liberal? We don't like John telling us that the moment of decision is at hand – 'the one who comes after me has his winnowing fan in his hand; he will gather the wheat into the barn but the chaff he will burn in a fire that will never go out' (3.17), but neither do we like the open acceptance of Jesus – does he not realise that some people are beyond

hope, beyond our acceptance and solidarity? In order to keep our lives on an even keel, lines have to be drawn – and we swither between dirge and dance, between John's demands and Jesus' inclusiveness.

Perhaps that is the burden we carry, the yoke that chafes. This is what makes us weary – this indecision, this moderation, this inability to totally commit to being God's slave and foot soldier, living under his grace. Who will rescue me from this body of death? – Jesus Christ our Lord, whose yolk is easy and whose burden is light.