

*"Take my yoke upon you, and learn from me" (Matthew 11:29).<sup>1</sup>*

Most of us would agree that this Fourth of July anniversary of our nation's founding is different. The sights and sounds of our Fourth of July celebrations are muted. And we like our celebrations to be big, noisy and colorful - parades, flags, fireworks, family gatherings with plenty of charred meat - the red, white and blue motif everywhere. Furthermore, Independence Day has long been our portal to the carefree days of summer, where the most hardened Type A personality could grab even a few moments of respite to celebrate and appreciate our country's freedom.

The novel corona virus does not care about all this. It is an enemy that silent and invisible. It is an enemy that did not consciously plot the strategy that holds us captive. It merely does what it needs to do to survive; that is, reproduce in a host - in humans. It doesn't care about social distancing, whether masks are necessary or even that it is the Fourth of July in America. But we care and we worry. There are too many unknowns. Will the rest of the year be as intensive and restrictive as the past 6 months? Is the virus changing, mutating? What about the rise of infection rates is the rest of the country? How can we stay healthy? Will there be an effective vaccine? The virus is with us, on our minds, even if we don't have it. We are concerned.

The Apostle Matthew had a concerns. There was a struggle for leadership and direction in Matthew's community. An inter-Jewish conflict posed the question: Which laws and traditions would govern Israel? The Pharisees focused on accurate interpretation of the law, the Torah. Paradoxically, it was through this rabbinical coalition that Judaism survived. Yet, the people were burdened. They were burdened by battle and conquest; they were burdened by the spiritual practices intended to open their Spirit to God. The prophet Jeremiah literally put on a yoke

---

<sup>1</sup> YrA\_5th\_Pentecost\_Pr9\_5July2020, Zechariah 9:9-12 ; Psalm 145:8-15; Romans 7:15-25a; Matthew 11:16-19, 25-30.  
Lincoln, Abraham, speech:

to represent the burdens inflicted by the Babylonians. Yokes by their very nature are restrictive. They control the movements of great beasts - the oxen and the like.

Some may think the Christian faith to be a yoke - that it is burdensome. Some Christian denominations certainly interpret the Bible in this way, as a list of “do’s and don’ts”, so that God’s message of salvation becomes lost in the complexity of the interpretation of God’s will. Also, the talk of sin is a “downer”. Who wants to be labelled a sinner, “when all I did was \_\_\_\_\_?”. Fill in the blank as you dare. Who wants to carry the burden of sin for a minor infraction?

Jesus addresses the failure of society as a whole, i.e., this generation, that somehow fails to respond to the needs of its people, ignoring the flute dancing and the reasons for weeping (vv. 16-18). Especially, during this Fourth of July week, the burdens of the Invisibles confront us: the rural poor, the abysmal conditions of the reservations/ancestral lands of the Native Americans, the disparities in healthcare based on ethnicity and class, the neglect of the elderly and the condemnation and neglect of urban poor. By every account, the gap between the rich and the less rich is growing to rival the chasm that separated the rich man and Lazarus (Luke 16:19-31). These are the negatives that distort the message of Freedom. However, the prayer of Jesus: “*I thank you father ...because you have hidden these things from the wise and the intelligent and have revealed them to them to infants...*”(vv. 25-26), identifies the recipients of divine revelation, a small group of people who listen, understand and follow Jesus, a small group of people who embrace these words:

“O God, the author of peace and lover of concord, to know you is eternal life and to serve you is perfect freedom”<sup>2</sup> .

How can Jesus offer us rest when he asks so much of us as his disciples? The yoke of Jesus is as counter-cultural as Jesus is himself. The yoke of Jesus is,

---

<sup>2</sup> Book of Common Prayer, A Collect for Peace, p.99.

paradoxically, a freedom rather than a burden. The Apostle Paul gives us this insight:

*“For freedom Christ has set us free; stand fast therefore, and do not submit again to a yoke of slavery.”* (Galatians 5:4)

The freedom offered in Christ allows access to the sovereign kingdom of God. The true Kingdom, a place ruled by the fruits of the spirit. This is the yoke that Jesus calls us to bear: to integrate our faith into our daily lives. That’s all.

The pandemic has forced us to rethink what we know about church and religion. We have felt the burden and weariness of not being together in our designated sacred spaces. The task of reopening to worship is burdensome. Will the Eucharist be the same? It will certainly look different. However, the presence of Christ’s body and blood still offers us new life. We have to remember to not let petty issues be our yoke. All we need remember is Jesus’ invitation: “Come to me”. Jesus opens the door to us again and again. We are free. We are home. We can rest.

Let us pray,

Almighty God, many years ago, you gave the founders of this country a home for those who are burdened: draw us together as one people to do your will, so that our country may be a light to the nations; show us there is no law or liberty apart from you: and let us serve you modestly as devoted followers of our Lord, Jesus Christ, whom with you and the Holy Spirit reign as one God. Amen.