

MATT 11.28-30: THE GREAT INVITATION

[Chelmsford, 26 August 2007]

How stressed are you?

At the end of the holiday season, that may seem to be a silly question – for many of us have been able to get away and recover from the stresses and strains of life.

But the new term is around the corner – and with the new term comes yet further stress and strain.

Some time ago the American news magazine *Time* ran an essay entitled, ‘*The Burnout of Just About Everybody*’. The thrust of the article was: it doesn’t matter what your job is - stress is the name of the game.

Indeed, I’m told that of the ten leading causes of death in America, eight are attributable to stress.

True, stress levels can vary.

A team from the Manchester University carried out a survey to try to ascertain the most stressful occupation in Britain.

They decided that the most stressful job to have was to be a coalminer (8.3 on a scale of 0-10) - with police officers coming second with stress-rating of 7.7, closely followed by construction workers, aircraft pilots and prison officers, all at 7.5.

The easiest job to have from a stress point of view was to be a librarian (2.0).

Interestingly ministers and beauty therapists were put on the same stress level of 3.5, while nannies and astronomers had it easier with a stress level of just 3.4.

Actually, I am not really convinced that this survey all that helpful - for stress arises not just from work, but from home too.

The fact that you are a librarian doesn't necessarily mean that you live a life of ease. If you are a lady librarian with an abusive husband, four teenage kids, and a crotchety mother-in-law living next door, then the odds are you're highly stressed.

It is against this backdrop of modern life, that I want to point you to some words of Jesus, commonly called ‘The Great Invitation’: **"Come to me all who are tired from carrying heavy loads, and I will give you rest. Take my yoke and put it on you, and learn from me, because I am gentle and humble in spirit; and you will find rest. For the yoke I will give you is easy, and the load I will put on you is light"** (Matt 11.28-30).

I COME TO JESUS

Jesus invites all who are stressed-out, burnt out, worn-out, and exhausted by all the pressures of every-day living, to come to him. **"Come to me"**, Jesus says, **"all of you who are tired from carrying heavy loads, and I will give your rest"**.

When Jesus first addressed this invitation, he spoke not to coal-miners or beauty-therapists, nor to those having to commute to the city on the 6.40. But to a bunch of first century Galilean peasants, farmers or fishermen, having to eke out a fairly precarious living off the land or from the sea. Life for them was tough.

BUT life was made even tougher for them by the religious leaders of the day. In fact almost certainly Jesus was talking in the first place to those worn out by religion. So Eugene Peterson in his paraphrase *The Message* has Jesus say: "Are you tired? Worn out? Burned out on religion? Come to me. Get away with me and you'll recover your life".

The fact was that as far as the average Jew was concerned religion had become a burden rather than a source of strength.

It was not supposed to be that way. A certain Ben Sira, who wrote the religious best-seller *Ecclesiasticus*, invited the unlearned to "come" to him and "lodge in his house of learning"; to "put their necks under the yoke" and "let their souls receive instruction" and so "find much rest". In this context the yoke was the Jewish Torah or law: devoted study of it will bring peace of mind, said Ben Sira!

That was the theory. In practice by the time of Jesus the Jewish religion degenerated into a series of petty rules & regulations dealing with the washing of hands and the wearing of false teeth on Sabbath. Jews then lived life in a forest of rules detailing every action – with a voice continually saying, "Thou shalt not".

It was in that context that Jesus attacked the Pharisees and scribes of his day: "**You put loads on people's backs which are hard to carry**" (Luke 11.46).

It was with those who had been burnt out by religion that Jesus invited people to "come" to him. "My load" - as distinct from the "loads" of others - is "easy".

"I will give you rest".

Sadly the legalistic spirit of the Pharisees & scribes has at times surfaced in the church. I remember as a child being on holiday at the seaside - a beautiful summer's day - but not being allowed to go to the beach - had to sit in our Sunday best and make polite conversation in somebody's garden.

As a teenager I never went to a dance - why the dance-floor was perceived as the devil's trap-door. And yet my parents were relatively enlightened compared to some.

Not surprisingly people have been turned off by the church and its legalism.

But it's not just legalism which can be exhausting.

It's all the activities a church puts on. Just look at the programme of activities for this autumn pinned on the notice-board outside the meeting place. It's enough to give anybody a heart-attack.

Jesus says: "**Come to me all who are tired from carrying heavy burdens**".

Notice the word "ALL". Yes, undoubtedly Jesus was appealing to those weary with religion - but we cannot restrict his appeal to such.

His invitation is addressed to all who are worn-out, to all who are weary: "**Come to me ALL who are tired**".

Jesus here speaks to me - he speaks to many others too.

- to those weighed down with responsibility - at work/home;
- to those who find it difficult to cope with the rat-race of life - those who are victims of the rat-race;
- to those whose minds are at the end of tether with worry, re finances, children, parents, whoever or whatever.

Whatever your "load" or "burden" is, come to Jesus.

"Come to me...for the yoke I will give you is easy".

It has been suggested that here we hear the voice of Jesus the carpenter. The word translated "easy" (*chrestos*) literally means 'well-fitting'.

In Palestine yokes were made of wood. An ox would be brought to the carpenter's house & measurements would be taken: the yoke would be roughed out & the ox brought back for fitting. The yoke was then adjusted so that it would fit-well – just like a tailor-made suit!

There is a lovely legend that tells of Jesus making the best yokes in all Galilee - people would come from miles around - they knew where to come, because above the shop was a sign: "*My yokes fit well*".

"Come to me - my yoke fits"

Here we have a reminder that true religion is not meant to be a burden.

We come to church not to support the work of Christ, but to be supported by Christ.

II SHARE YOUR LIFE WITH JESUS

"Come to me...take my yoke and put it on you".

At first sight these are most uninviting words: "**Take my yoke and put it on you**".

An understandable response would be to say: "*No thanks Jesus - I've got enough pressures on my life, without having to take on anything else!*"

The picture here does seem most off-putting.

I don't know how many of you ever seen a man ploughing with horses, but it's no easy job. Within an hour or two the horse begins to shine with perspiration & strain as he pulls the share through the stubborn soil. It is tough, monotonous work - seemingly endless as the horse goes up & down, down & up - hour after hour, day after day.

Translate all this into the local colour of the East: oxen not horses - add the glare of pitiless sun together with dust storms blowing past and merciless heat – and in your mind's eye see the poor creatures pulling away.

It is not a picture of rest, but of hard labour!

If this is what Jesus is offering, no thank you!

But that is to misunderstand the invitation of Jesus.

Jesus doesn't want to add to the pressures of life, but to reduce the pressures of life.

Another misunderstanding is to hear Jesus say: "*Come & escape the pressures of life*".

Jesus is a realist: there is a life to be lived, there is work to be done.

We are not exempt from the strains and stresses of living.

Life with Jesus does not involve living in some little plastic bubble, where we can be immune from the demands of daily living.

When we come to Jesus we don't suddenly find ourselves living on another planet.

If you have an alcoholic husband, four teenage kids, and a crotchety mother-in-law living next door, you won't - on coming to Christ - all of a sudden find yourself removed to the calm of a convent.

No, Jesus in issuing this invitation is inviting us to share the pressures with him

Come to me when life is tough, and share your load with me.

I find it significant that the dictionary definition of a yoke is "a *wooden cross-piece fastened over necks of TWO oxen*".

I.e. Jesus is saying: 'Come and let me add my strength to yours and pull along with you - let your load become mine - let your burden become manageable with me'.

Our circumstances will remain the same - but we will no longer be on our own.

"Take my yoke and put it on you, and learn from me, because I am gentle and humble in spirit".

What has gentleness and humility got to do with it?

It would make more sense if Jesus had said: "*I am tough & strong -no problem is a problem with me*".

Almost certainly Jesus was alluding to Isaiah's description of the Suffering Servant of the Lord: "**Here is my servant... He will not shout or raise his voice... He will not break off a bent reed or put out a flickering lamp.... He was treated harshly, but endured it humbly; he never said a word. Like lamb about to be slaughtered, like a sheep about to be sheared, he never said a word**".

I.e. Jesus is not remote from your experiences & mine - he has been one of us.

He knows what it is like to have his back against the wall.

He knows what it is like to be rejected & misunderstood.

He knows what it is like to suffer and to seem to fail.

"Come to me...learn from me" - I can teach you to face the worst - for I've been through it - and I've been that way before.

I am reminded that when a person has to have major surgery such as a colostomy, they are normally visited by somebody who had the operation before. Yes, its tough - but there is life after a colostomy. Re-assuring - learning experience.

"Come to me...learn from me"

Let's go back to imagery of yoke: I'm told that when young horses were yoked for the first time, they were yoked with an older, wiser, and experienced horse.

His very presence would steady & soothe the frightened & inexperienced horse.

We may be yoked with Jesus - we can share life and all its problems with Jesus - what a privilege!

III YOU WILL FIND REST

"Come to me... take my yoke ...learn from me... and I will give you rest"

NB the three imperatives are followed by an indicative

Jesus ends his invitation with a promise not a command: "**I will give you rest**".

And this is not anybody making a promise: this is Jesus.

With some promises one can be cynical - as Jonathan Swift once said: "*Promises and piecrusts are made to be broken*".

But Jesus, God's Son, is not in the business of conning anyone.

Jesus says: "**Come to me** - *stop trying to live life in own strength - not just worth the candle - come.... and I will give you rest*"

I believe that Jesus is directing this invitation to each of us today:

1. he is directing the invitation to those of you here who have never truly come to Jesus; who have never committed your lives to his safekeeping; who have sought to live life with his help
2. he is also directing the invitation to some who may at one stage have committed their lives to Christ, and yet for whom the life gone out of religion. You still attend church; you are still involved in church activities - but somehow you are not really sharing your life with him. Jesus says: "*Come and share your life with me - not just today, but day. Come and let me take the strain and stress out of your living - come and find **rest***".

"Come to me – come – and I will give you rest"

Or as Peterson puts it: "*Are your 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*". Yes, **come!**