

Understanding Jesus' Yoke As a Clue to Christian Discipleship

For My Yoke is Easy, and my Burden Light

Matthew 11: 25-30

In the preceding chapters, as we journeyed with Jesus after the resurrection, we have seen how Jesus emphatically and compassionately interacts with his disciples in many different ways, as a form of strengthening and encouraging them on how they could resolutely embrace and face the world, as he leaves them behind in his way back to the father. Critical to Jesus' reassurance was the promise that though, he might leave the world back to the father, he will never leave them desolate, as he will always equally remain in the midst and life of their ministry. In the interregnum between the road linking the Resurrection and the Accession, the Great Commission has been the hallmark of Jesus' interactive farewell with his disciples and the ecclesia of his day. In the Great Commission, the reassurance that the Risen Lord is the one who remains present in the life and ministry of his disciples has remained the driving force motivating both the disciples' mission and that of the church ancient. In this the mission of the modern church cannot be excluded. In his message, Jesus proves himself to be both the *present* and the *future*, to be both the *word* and the *deed*. To the core, Jesus proves himself to be the true wisdom that vindicates itself in works of salvation and liberation in a complex and adverse world.

For John came neither eating nor drinking, and they say, 'He has a demon'; the son of Man came eating and drinking, and they say, 'Look, a glutton and a drunkard, a friend of tax collectors and sinner! Yet wisdom is vindicated by her deeds (Matt 11:18-19).

Jesus' sees his own rejection by the world as a mark and yoke of his own ministry. Those contemplating to follow him should know that rejection and neglect would be the price to pay. Having asked the disciples to take courage and remain fearless as they face the world's adversity, to deny themselves and pick up their crosses and follow him when necessary, and the church to accept the reception of his disciples as his own, today Jesus continues to ask his disciples and the world to try and learn from his yoke, to embrace and understand his yoke so as to be able to have a share in his own ministry and to see the yoke as the only clue to Christian discipleship: a yoke that inspires, pacifies, and eases the burdens of the weary.

The reality of Jesus' Yoke as a Clue to Christian Discipleship

Because of his deepest longing for the world's peace and justice, for his compassion for the weary and heavy burdened, Jesus' prayer turns into a form of invitation for the weary to come to him to find peace, solace, and rest:

At that time Jesus said. "I thank you, Father, Lord of heaven and earth, because you have hidden these things from the wise and the intelligent and have revealed them to infants; yes Father, for such was your gracious will. All things have been handed over to me by my Father; and no one knows the Son except the Father, and no one knows the Father except the Son and anyone to whom the Son chooses to reveals him. "Come to me, all you that are weary and are carrying heavy burdens and I will give you rest." 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.

Jesus' outpouring of faith and compassion over the suffering world, as well as over his father's confidence and revelation, for revealing the divine mysteries, to infants and his hiding to the "wise and intelligent" only shows that no matter how higher our religious beliefs may be, how higher our intellectual probing and prayer may soar, if we do not take

into account the needs and longings of the poor and the marginalized of society such intellectualism and supplications can only amount to nothing but hypocrisy. In the bible, Jesus always challenged the “wise and intelligent” of the religious establishment and society of his day, such as the scribes and the Pharisees, to take seriously the teaching of the Torah so as to vindicate the needs of the poor and the weary to whom God’s gracious will rests most. For their self-regard as learned and experts in the Law of Moses, yet failing to understand the basic tenets of justice, mercy, and faith (Matt 23:23), Jesus deemed their wisdom as empty hypocrisy.

Given their self-regard and pride, the “wise and intelligent” constantly rejected Jesus’s proclamation and plotted against him. Hence, plotting against the true wisdom, the true yoke, the true Torah, and the very purpose of God’s love. In the Sermon on the Mount, Jesus always praised the socially and religiously outcast, the burdened of society, as the meek, the merciful, and so the blessed ones for by undertaking such heavy burdens they have embraced Christ’s yoke upon themselves (Matt 5:3-12). These, as the rejected of society, are the ones Jesus intercedes on their behalf and pleads upon to take his yoke upon themselves in order to find peace and comfort, for his yoke is easy, and his burden light. The circle can be extended to include the lame, the lepers, the socially, morally, and economically hand-capped; the demon-possessed, the tax collectors and sinners, to whom Jesus comes for healing of body and spirit. It is God’s gracious will to act in ways that confound human wisdom. Therefore, the socially excluded and marginalized because of their conditions have become for Jesus like infants who see what the “wise and intelligent” cannot see and understand. To these, Jesus is sent by the Father to reveal his glory to them.

The Yoke, its theological and religious context

For Matthew, Jesus is the Thora, the yoke, for he came to fulfil and reinterpret the Torah in order to revive and strengthen the faith of the weary and the heavily burdened. The way the Pharisees read, interpreted, and practiced the Torah excluded and neglected the central matters of the law which are justice, mercy, and faith, hence aggravating the plight of the weary. Jesus’s reading and understanding of the yoke is easy because it brings life to the weary, brings healing to the sick, brings dignity to the excluded and overlooked of society. To make sense to us today, it would be of interest to read and try to understand the present message in the context of the socio-political and economic circumstances facing the poor in the society of Jesus’ day, in the context of the Roman empire and its relationship with the religious and political establishments of the day. Under Roman occupation, the common people laboured wearily to benefit the ruling elite. Jesus rejects this social order as contrary to God’s will and sees his coming to the world as a ransom for many: ‘You know that the rulers of the Gentiles lord it over them, and their great ones are tyrants over them. It will not be so among you; but whoever wishes to be great among you must be your servant, and whoever wishes to be first among you must be your slave; just as the Son of Man came not to be served but to serve, and to give his life.’

At times, when religious leaders or people faith allow the institutions of faith to connive with the ruling system and powers that be and becoming instruments of power that are contrary to the divine purpose in which they are framed, they may lose their impetus as divine instruments that are meant to liberate God’s people from adversity, their yoke becoming heavy and uneasy to bear. Where the power of wisdom and intelligence is used in order to oppress and exclude rather than to liberate or unseat the yoke of the weary, Jesus sees such wisdom as hypocrisy and contrary to God’s will. But what is the yoke Jesus is inviting the weary to carry, will it be a yoke of injustice? Theologians share that in the society of Jesus’ day, the yoke was ‘a familiar symbol of burden bearing, oppression, and

subjugation. Yokes were laid on the necks and shoulders of oxen and also on prisoners of war and slaves. But "yoke" was also used metaphorically with positive connotations, as in the invitation to wisdom in Sirach 51:26, "Put your neck under her yoke, and let your souls receive instruction," and as a rabbinic metaphor for the difficult but joyous task of obedience to Torah.¹ In Matthew, Jesus as the new Torah, as the new yoke, as offering a new and liberating interpretation of the law also implies that every letter of the law should move from a culture of authority to one of justification and explanation every use of power should be justified and explained. Hence, Jesus' invitation to take the yoke is one of freedom and liberation that complies with his way of discipleship, which is not burdensome but life-giving. He invites the weary to learn from him, for he is not a tyrant who lords it over his disciples, but is "gentle and humble in heart." His yoke is easy and his burden is light for it brings life. The invitation may not be easy to bear, it may be cumbersome but life giving. To take Jesus' yoke is to side oneself with the excluded and the rejected of society. To take his yoke upon oneself is to be yoked to the one in whom God's kingdom of justice, mercy, and compassion is breaking into this world, who is Jesus himself.

The present reading could not have come in a critical moment, when we are faced with the yoke of covid-19 pandemic, in which social distancing translated in terms of lockdown is the yoke we should embrace upon ourselves as a way of facing the pandemic. Apart from lockdown, the pandemic itself with its detrimental consequences is hard to bear especially among the poor of the poorest. Massive loss of human lives has become a common narrative, economic downturn and unemployment are becoming part of the new normal for many families. With all these, we can only find solace in a Jesus who invites the weary and all those who are carrying heavy burdens to come to him in order to find rest. We can only rely on the wisdom and intelligence of our religious and political leaders, who constantly take the effort of assisting us on how we should respond and move ourselves in the context of covid-19 pandemic and lockdown. Despite its detrimental effects what may help in facing the pandemic constructively is to see it as a lesson to be leaned.

Amen

¹ *Op. cit.*, 1988, p. 150