

## **Sermon for 5<sup>th</sup> July 2026, Year A, Pentecost 6, Proper 9**

**Preached at St John's Baillieston**

**Matthew 11:16-19,25-end**

### **Sermon**

Those last few verses from the gospel reading draw our attention and longing, like a moth to a flame. “Come to me, all you that are weary and carrying heavy burdens”, says Jesus, “and I will give you rest”. After the last few years of Covid, Brexit, wars near and far, endless cost of living crises, I don't know anyone who doesn't fall into this category. Even if we weren't weary and burdened before, we certainly are now.

So, it's no surprise that we hear Christ's words in this gospel as truly good news – the promise of real release from our stress – and all we have to do is take Jesus' yoke upon us, which he promises will be easy and light.

What Jesus doesn't do is tell us exactly what this yoke might look like. We're left to imagine for ourselves what Jesus might be asking of us. A yoke is of course a wooden bar that joined together a pair of oxen under the guidance and control of a farmer, so that they could effectively serve the farmer's will in ploughing the fields. So, the yoke that Jesus is talking about might be something to do with being willingly tied together with other followers of Jesus, to allow ourselves to be directed by him, rather than all pulling in different directions.

For some people, being yoked might start to sound like more of a burden than simply doing our own thing and dealing with our anxiety and stress in our own tried and tested ways. Meanwhile, Jesus teaches that there is a way of freedom and joy and love that is always available to us, and its burden is indeed light, but only if we're able to give up our constant urge to think about ourselves first and foremost.

Mystics such as St Teresa of Avila or John of the Cross and many others have always pointed out that if we want to become close to God, we must eventually give up having things our own way on our own terms. This is why in monasteries and convents the first vow is the vow of obedience to a religious superior. From the earliest days, monks and nuns knew that to become like Jesus, they needed to come to him firstly with an attitude of humility and a willingness to set aside their own goals and ambitions, and their own wisdom, and especially their need to have things done their preferred way.

Thomas Merton, the American monk, wrote memorably that he suffered for many years listening to the other side of the monastic choir singing at the wrong speed and pitch before he was able to let go of his inward groans and visible frown, and accept that God probably loved the bad singers just as much as the good ones.

Remember that just before Jesus offers us an escape from our weariness and our burdens, he reminds us that the things he is teaching are hidden from the wise and have instead been revealed to children. Why? Because the wise and intelligent already have their own ideas about which way they should go. They have no interest in being yoked together with those they consider inferior or who they think are going in the wrong direction. They know best and they have all the answers if only everyone would listen to them. Such people struggle to find rest for their souls in Jesus because they will not truly listen to him with humility. Whether we admit it or not, most of us want Jesus to do *our* will – we want Jesus to dance to our tune.

This is why Jesus compared the people to fickle children in the marketplace, who kept changing the rules of the game. When John the Baptist came with stern words, a man who did not drink or go to parties, who wore hair shirts and only ate wild locusts and honey, they told him he was deranged, that he needed to lighten up and be more reasonable. But when Jesus the Christ came enjoying the

hospitality and parties of wealthy people and eating and drinking and healing people on the Sabbath, they told him he was a glutton and a drunkard.

People will do anything to keep doing everything their own way. They will convince themselves that their way is God's way. They will insist that they are following the rules to perfection, or at least well enough to meet God's approval. But what they will never do is place their heads in the yoke with other people and risk Jesus leading them in a different direction.

Our autonomy is hard-won, and we have no desire to give it up. So, we settle for the best we can achieve, using our wisdom and powers of persuasion to cajole or sometimes outright bully others into our point of view. You only have to look at the comment sections on social media to see this in action, even among Christians. If one argument doesn't work, we'll change the tune and try something else. "We played the flute for you, and you did not dance. We played a dirge and you did not mourn". We can never come to Christ and truly lay down our burdens at his feet, because our burdens are rooted in our need to keep control and make the world dance to our tune.

It was months after I first went to live in a monastery before I eventually came to realise that all my anxieties were rooted in my desire to dictate my own future. I wanted to be respected for what I could do. I wondered constantly when I might be promoted to one of the more important jobs. I wanted to be allowed to lead the singing rather than being kept on the back row in silence. I wanted to be seen as holy and wise, someone who could teach and lead others in prayer. It was all about me. And if you were to read my journals from those days you would see that I was constantly anxious about the progress I was making. Am I holy yet? Am I humble? When will they acknowledge and praise me for it?

The yoke of Jesus is not easy and light because we get to do what we want. It's easy and light because we get to let go of our need to be in control – our need

to have everyone else dance to our tune. Only then can we come to Jesus as a trusting little child, and not as someone who thinks they already have all the answers, who is getting frustrated waiting for everyone else to catch up.

Now, there's an amazing thing that happens when a church is full of humble people who have laid aside their own self-importance to be yoked together in Christ. The church then becomes Christ for those around her. Just as Christ tells us to come to him for release of our burdens, so we are called to be Christ for our neighbours around us. We seek to become humble and selfless and loving like Jesus so that we can also say, "Come to St John's, all you who are weary and carrying heavy burdens, and you will find rest for your souls". Can you imagine if our churches were not simply somewhere you might hear about Christ, or sing about Christ, or pray to Christ, but where people could actually meet Christ – actually meet God in the community of people who have laid down their burdens at his feet?

This I believe is our true calling as Christians – not just to strive to be a better person, but to embody God's selfless love for each other, and for all who are seeking him, wherever they are on that journey.

We do not come to Christ simply to lay our burdens at his feet and then carry on as before. *We come to Christ to give up everything that stops us becoming Christ.* That's the yoke of humility that Jesus wishes to place upon us. This is the yoke that, if we willingly accept it, will create the kingdom of heaven among us, and make us shine like a lighthouse of love to everyone who meets us.