

**July 9, 2017 - Matthew 11:16-19, 25-end; - Romans 7:15-25a**

TITLE: "Learn from me"

Last Sunday afternoon our hallway was strewn with washing, sleeping bags, camping paraphernalia and bits of craft loosely based on a Harry Potter theme. Three children had returned from a joint scout, cub and beaver camp. Three children had cast their burdens as soon as they got through the front door in the expectation that washing would be sorted, cleaned and put away and, in the case of one of them, everything would be made ready to set off again for another camp this weekend.

Of course, Jesus wasn't talking about rucksacks and sleeping bags when he said come to me all you who are weary and carrying heavy burdens, but there are some themes we can draw out. Jesus's invitation is in three parts;

- "Come to me." When we come to Jesus we come "home".
- "I will give you rest." We can hand over our burdens at the front door. We can rest in confidence that our spiritual needs can be met and our load can be sorted.
- "Learn from me." We can prepare ourselves for an ongoing journey by spending time with Jesus and becoming more like him.

Rowan Williams addresses this invitation in his book *Being Disciples*. I know this has been mentioned here before, but it is such a small book, with such a lot of good, clear learning, I urge you to read it if you have not already done so.

In New Testament times, being a disciple meant spending time with your teacher, learning through watching and absorbing the things they said and the way they lived. We can come to spend time with Jesus in many ways, in prayer, worship or study, by ourselves or with others. But however we come, we need to come with an attitude which is open and honest. We should come with "self-knowledge." or capacity to step back a little from what we are feeling, what we think we are wanting, and what other people are wanting. Rowan Williams says it like this; We need to face our feelings and say,

"Now come on, how real are you? What is this really about?"

Jesus invites us to make him our home. In John's gospel he says, "abide in me as I abide in you." Our abode is the place where we live, the place we feel most ourselves, the place where we can be real, where we can empty our dirty washing on the hall floor! When we come to Jesus we can rest knowing that here is a place where we don't have to pretend to be something we are not. Where we won't be asked to do something beyond our capabilities. Where we are loved for who we are.

So, what is it that we need to take rest from? What is weighing us down or holding us back in our spiritual journey?

Paul calls it "the law of sin." A way of being and behaving that is contrary to God's way, but to which we all are susceptible. I suggest that it is something that you might describe in broad terms as, "The ways of the world." Things real or perceived that restrict us from throwing ourselves fully into the life God has planned for us.

Our gospel passage begins shortly after a visit from the disciples of John the Baptist. Jesus compares the crowd to children who won't engage in what is going on around them, whether dancing to a catchy tune or joining in the traditional public displays of grief.

Both Jesus and John the Baptist were unconventional. They didn't behave in the way people expected and they didn't always say the things people wanted to hear. The crowd attributed John's unusual lifestyle

to demons, but were equally scandalised by Jesus's association with those they believed to be unrespectable. Like the children, they refused to hear anything they did not want to hear. Anything that did not accord with their conventions or expectations. There was no pleasing them.

We see Paul struggling similarly with breaking from conventions. He is writing at a time where there is tension between Jewish and Gentile Christians and debate about how and to what extent those of Jewish background should continue to follow the Law. Paul himself had been a Pharisee and had been immersed in the law. In this reading you can almost feel the internal tussle as he reminds himself that the law is good, it has come from God, but at the same time it can be an influence for sinful behaviour. A bit like small children being told not to do something, the law can point the way to disobedience and rebellion. Paul is not saying that the law itself is bad; It has its place in teaching us how to live our lives. But Paul could see that the law can constrain and restrict. Paul concludes that sin has taken advantage of the law's commandments, using them as tools to deceive people and preventing them from being able to obey the law as God intended. No amount of law keeping can bridge the gap between our sinfulness and God's holiness and it can prevent spiritual growth by sending us on a tangent or by limiting our creativity and imagination.

If we depend only on the law, we cannot experience fully the abundance of God's grace.

Like the people of Jesus's day, we can be weighed down by expectations and conventions. We put pressure on ourselves to conform to what the world thinks we should do and how the world views success. Maybe our culture, experience or upbringing prevent us from appreciating a point of view, different to our own. Maybe we are swept along with the tide of public opinion or through manipulation by the media. We may not have lists about ritual cleansing, when we should work or who we should associate with, but, we live by many rules and conventions and make judgements based on the way people speak, what they wear, what they put their energies into.

Having handed over our burden, Jesus says "learn from me." Through Jesus we can come closer to God, because of the special bond between God the Father and Jesus the Son. If we truly want to live as Christ's disciples, we must expect to learn. Learning leads to growth, but for this to happen we must allow ourselves to be led. Jesus uses the image of a yoke to illustrate how we are to walk alongside him, going where he goes, sharing the load. Over time, yokes have been adapted and carved to fit the animal they were designed for and to maximise comfort and a willingness to work. By aligning ourselves with Jesus, our burdens can be eased and made to fit our particular circumstances.

Jesus does not say that he will take away hardship and difficulty. Bad things do happen, life has its seasons, good and bad. Times can be very tough as we see in our communities and night after night in the news. So where do you turn when things are difficult, when you feel weary and heavy laden? When you are overwhelmed and don't know what to do? Do you turn to the ways of the world, or to the way of Jesus?

The yoke of Jesus is the best design for our needs. It is easier to bear than the burdensome yoke of self-righteousness and legalism or the more modern yoke of peer appreciation and acceptance. It requires repentance, faith and a commitment to follow. When we do follow, we find that things fall into place, that there is a comfort, even in hard times because with Jesus we are home. With Jesus, we can be ourselves. Jesus knows the best fit, he walks alongside and shares the load.

A relative told us about his days of scouting in the 1950's in Aberdeen. Instead of each carrying their own rucksack, this troupe had a hand cart with a long T shaped handle. They would load it with all their kit and, pulling together, would walk to and from camp. Unlike the crowd in the Gospel, all the scouts engaged with the task in hand, sharing the load, all travelling together. To me, camping in the highlands without the benefit of modern kit doesn't sound at all comfortable, but listening to his memories and looking at old photographs, you could tell that in this environment, these boys were totally at home.