

Easy yoke – Psalm 145:8-14, Matthew 11:16-19, 25-30

I started thinking this week – maybe it was word association with the word ‘yoke’ – about oxymorons.



(Not silly or foolish oxen though I did come across this Mark Parisi cartoon – which made me laugh!)

No. Oxymorons are figures of speech where two words with very different meanings are put together to create a new, seemingly self-contradictory, word or phrase. (I love the Goodwill Librarian definition - *“an oxymoron is what happens when words get into a little argument and decide to stay together anyway!”*) Some examples are ‘bittersweet’ or ‘deafening silence’ or ‘Canberra nightlife!’ Or those in the public or private sector would know ‘open government’ or ‘managed spontaneity’ or ‘budget neutral investment’ or ‘adaptive bureaucracy’ or ‘consultative directive’ or ‘public service innovatio’.

And the word oxymoron itself is an oxymoron! It comes from the Greek words ὀξύς (*oksús*) meaning ‘sharp or pointed’ and μωρός (*mōros*) ‘dull or stupid’. So, ‘sharply dull’ or ‘pointedly stupid’.

But the main reason I started thinking about oxymorons is because there are two in our New Testament reading today – Jesus speaking about the life of discipleship as wearing an ‘easy yoke’ or bearing a ‘light burden’.

Can I start with the first oxymoron – ‘easy yoke’?

It’s an oxymoron because there does not seem to be anything easy about a yoke – even if (as we illustrated in the children’s talk) the purpose of a yoke is not to burden us, but to make our burdens easier to carry!

Throughout Scripture the yoke is a symbol of servitude and lifting the yoke or breaking the yoke is the language of liberation.

For instance, in the Jeremiah reading that Ben preached on so wonderfully last week, the prophet Jeremiah is wearing – the latest in object lesson couture - a wooden yoke around his neck to indicate to King Zedekiah and the priests and the people that the yoke of Babylon, the rule of Babylon, was there to stay for a while. The prophet Hananiah, however – the Pollyanna prophet, *‘in two years this will all be over’* – lifts the yoke from Jeremiah’s neck and breaks it – a powerful prophetic act – except he’s wrong, and God responds, saying, *“You have broken wooden bars only to forge iron bars in place of them!”*

Yokes are associated then with foreign domination. However. during the post exilic period, 516 BCE to 70 CE, ‘yoke’ also came to be understood as a metaphor for obedience to God, especially with regard to observing the law of God, the Torah

So, if Jesus is speaking about a yoke of obedience to God, in what ways is Jesus' yoke an 'easy' yoke or a 'good or kind' yoke, as it can be translated?

Perhaps, firstly, we are assured that this life of obedience is not one where we are alone; where we are given rules and told we must follow them. Rather it is a life of walking with and 'learning from' Jesus. That is discipleship!

I can remember lying in bed the night before starting Year 3 and being totally terrified! I didn't know what you had to know as a Year 3! I only knew Year 2 work! How would I survive? I wouldn't! And then realising, the next day and in the days that followed, that Year 3 was a day-to-day learning proposition. And the same, in an even greater sense, of our lives as disciples of Jesus. It is a day to day learning proposition, learning from Jesus.

And we are learning from a teacher who is *"gentle and humble in heart"*.

And who promises us rest! A wonderful promise that is both an eschatological promise, the rest and restoration of the whole creation, and a day to day promise of rest in God's presence. As God says to Moses in Exodus 33:14, *"My presence will go with you, and I will give you rest."*

I mentioned the definition of an oxymoron is *"what happens when words get into a little argument and decide to stay together anyway"*. 'Yoke' and 'easy' might not seem to have the easiest relationship, but when we think about whose yoke this is, who we are serving; the one who walks with us and shows us the way, the one who is gentle and humble in heart and the one who gives us rest, 'easy yoke' fits together and fits us!

Which brings me to the second oxymoron 'light burdens'.

Are the burdens we carry, that we might be called to carry as Christians, light? After all, back in Matthew 5:20 we are told, *"unless your righteousness exceeds that of the scribes and the Pharisees you will never enter the kingdom of heaven."* In 7:14 Jesus describes the road to life as a narrow gate and a hard road. And in Matthew 10 we are told there will be rejection and suffering and, verse 38, *"whoever does not take up their cross and follow me is not worthy of me."* None of this sounds light!

But Jesus is speaking to "all you that are weary and are carrying heavy burdens" He is speaking about the burdens that abusive religious leaders place on others. In Matthew 23 he says, *"Do whatever they teach you and follow it; but do not do as they do, for they do not practice what they teach. They tie up heavy burdens, hard to bear, and lay them on the shoulders of others; but they themselves are unwilling to lift a finger to move them."*

At the Open Baptists conference a few weeks ago, several participants spoke very powerfully about how much courage it requires, after years of stigma and abuse, for LGBTIQ+ people to walk through the doors of a church, and I

was reminded of Rachel Held Evans' story, in *Searching for Sunday*, about going to the Gay Christin Network Conference and being started by the *"degree to which so many attendees had suffered, sometimes brutally, at the hands of many Christians trying to 'cure' them of their sexual orientation."*

On the last night, at an open mic, a man got up and asked for forgiveness. He'd been a pastor for more than 30 years, he said, and used every verse, every argument he could muster to defeat those who wanted to support LGBTIQ+ inclusion. Then, he said, *"I met a young lesbian woman who, over a period of many years, slowly changed my mind. She was a person of great faith and grace, and her life was her greatest apologetic."*

"I am truly sorry," he went on, *"I know my misguided apologetics and my silent complicity did more damage than I can ever know. Please forgive me."*

And from the audience someone called out, *"We forgive you."* But he held up his hand, *"There's more. The other day I was dropping my son at high school – he's in Year 12 – and we were talking about this and I said my thinking about homosexuality had changed, and he got very quiet and then he said, 'Dad, I'm gay'....I wonder,"* he said, *if these last few years of studying, praying and rethinking things were all to prepare me for that moment."*

A moment of realising a burden had been lifted, a moment of being part of lifting/lightening a burden, a moment of realising the burden we carry is light.

There is a burden we carry as disciples; the love of God and love for one another, and care for one another, and carrying one another's burdens and sharing in the work of welcoming all who are weary and burdened down, sharing in the work of lightening burdens. This is the burden we carry.

Last Sunday at St Kilda, I was talking to Alan Marr, a pastor and former Director of Ministries for the Victorian Baptist Union, and he said – and this was humbling - that I and this church are greatly admired. *"It must have been so hard,"* he said, *"such a heavy thing to carry – the disaffiliation and all that has happened."* And I thought for a moment and I said, *"Alan, it has actually been a joy. Yes, it been hard, but God has been with us, and the burden has been shared, and it has been a joy."*

The life of discipleship is a life of taking a yoke, yes, but it is an easy yoke in companionship with Jesus, and the life of discipleship is hard, yes, the hardest thing we might ever do, but it is a light burden as we work with God, as we work together, as we lift the burdens of others. Let us hear God's invitation to us, *"Come to me, all you who 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."* And let us respond together.

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