

Jesus uses the image of a 'yoke' in his teaching today, and just in case that's not a familiar word or image for everyone, here's a picture of a yoke.



It's the piece of wood over the shoulders of a pair of working animals – usually oxen – that keeps them in step with each other, and also lets the farmer guide them so they plough in a straight line. Left to their own devices, the oxen might pull away from each other, one getting ahead of the other, or the animals might veer off in some random direction pulling the plough along behind.

Jesus invites us to take his yoke onto ourselves and learn from his gentle and humble ways. Which is another way of saying, if we learn to be guided by him, walking according to his leading and carrying only those burdens on our shoulders that are ours to carry, our lives can be restful even when they're full. There is a work for us each to do, but it shouldn't be ill-fitting or cause us heaps of stress or overwhelm us if we are learning from Jesus how to live lightly in this world. Lightly, but not carelessly. Lightly, but seriously. Lightly, but also embracing sacrifice and self-giving. Lightly, because we are free from burdens that do not belong to us, and from damaging, cruel, unnecessary loads.

But while Jesus tells us that walking under his yoke is easy, finding that yoke, learning to discern and discover it, especially in a time of change or challenge, is not. Change is always hard. And it's made harder when we don't know what's coming next – we only know that something is coming to an end.

Change is also difficult when we want to get things right – when we believe that there are some choices we could make that are better than others – more closely aligned with God's will. But the problem is, once we've ruled out some things that are clearly wrong, there's often not just one way to be good, or one right path. And nobody else can really tell us which way to go. There are plenty of people who will try. But they're like the people Jesus compares to 'children sitting in the marketplaces.' Everyone's expectations of us are different and some come with judgement.

John the Baptist fasted in the wilderness, and the people were threatened by his discipline and said he had a demon. Jesus went to parties and ate with undesirables and the people were threatened by his freedom and called him a glutton and a drunkard.

In fact, both Jesus and John were living the life that God's Spirit called them to. And that's where we get to the nub of it – there are different ways of living a good and righteous life. And you can't always tell from the outside whether someone else is keeping in step with the Spirit's call for their flourishing and the life of the world. There's no one template or standard for Christian living that fits every Christian.

What we do know, is that it's not possible for any of us to live up to what we think is good and right – or even to know what *is* good and right – without the transforming presence of the Christ, living within us. And that's what Jesus also means when he talks about coming to him and receiving his easy yoke, and his light burden.

The yoke that Jesus wants for us is to let him dwell in us and guide us. Only by feeling and responding to God's inner nudges, can we know what is ours to pick up, and ours to put down. And that will be different for each of us.

The shape of Jesus' gentle yoke won't be the same for us as for other people. And it won't be the same in our 20s, 40s, 60s, and 80s. We change. The world changes. What it looks like to work and rest changes. But we are all still called to live the unburdened, free life of Christ, following the guidance of God's Holy Spirit.

The gentleness of Jesus' yoke, and its ease, comes from the fact that God is an ever-present guide, offering course corrections along the way. It's the difference between travelling with someone else's directions and driving with a GPS or a satnav. If you're trying to remember a set of directions, such as 'turn left, then at the roundabout go right, and then left at the top of the hill...', and you end up taking a wrong turning, before you know it you're completely lost. With a GPS, if there's a blocked road, or you go the wrong way, the GPS just recalculates your route. It takes you another way. It's instant, and it doesn't shout at you for getting it wrong. It just quietly offers a new possibility for getting where you need to be.

God is the GPS, not the memorised directions. In God's heart, there are endless possibilities for discovering the abundant life. God can recalculate our lives.

Maybe you have suppressed something you are really fitted for in your life because of what other people wanted from you. Or maybe you've felt guilty for years because you've been trying to live up to some standards that you thought God wanted, but were really someone else's values. Or you did something ages ago that felt like it wrecked your life and you can't see how things could be good again.

Or maybe you compare yourself with others and tell yourself you should be doing more, or giving more. Or maybe you've avoided places and people that would have given you joy, because someone taught you that real Christians don't go there, or mix with that kind of person.

It's not just the burden of being exhausted from doing too much that we need to be released from – although many of us know that kind of tiredness. It's also the mental burden of anxiety about not doing enough, or doing the wrong things, or of fearing that whatever we're doing isn't acceptable, or that we've missed out on the opportunity to be who we really are or do what we really love.

To each of us, Jesus says '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.' There is a task to be done as the Church, and as individual saints, no matter what age and life stage we are in. A yoke, no matter how gentle, is a guiding tool for a willing worker. It's not an armchair or a bed! Rest in Christ is about finding the well-fitted yoke, one that doesn't cause us to strive or strain, and that doesn't harm us by putting unnecessary burdens on our shoulders.

There is discipline involved in this. The discipline to stop and listen. The discipline to pray in ways that help us discover the difference between the voice of God, and the voice of habit, or fear, or cultural pressure. The discipline of seeking and receiving guidance and direction from wise friends and counsellors. And then the discipline to act on what we have learned, within the limits and realities of our circumstances.

May we be those who gladly take on the yoke of following God's inner guidance, offering our lives in ways that build God's kingdom and that are specially well-fitted for us – as we are, and as we are becoming.