

## Teaching: Winter-Spring 2021



**The theme for the coming term will be to explore what it means to 'leave the ninety-nine'. We will look at what this tells us about the heart (motivation) of God and the mission of God. We will explore welcome – who is welcome and what does welcome actually mean. We will look at examples of how Jesus engages with 'the least, the last and the lost'.**

**Sunday 31st January, 2021**

### **1. Reading: Matthew 11: 28-30**

NRSV: '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.'

The Message: "Are you tired? Worn out? Burned out on religion? Come to me. Get away with me and you'll recover your life. I'll show you how to take a real rest. Learn the unforced rhythms of grace. I won't lay anything heavy or ill-fitting on you. Keep company with me and you'll learn to live freely and lightly."

### **2. Questions:**

- i. Jesus said, 'take my yoke upon you'. The image of the 2 oxen bound together by a yoke, shaped to fit and designed to enable them to work together, alongside and pulling in the same direction. How does this image speak to you about the relationship that Jesus invites us to have with him? What has the yoke required of you and what is it asking of you today?
- ii. The outstretched arms of Jesus on the cross is the ultimate expression of God's invitation and welcome. How can we express God's welcome in what we do and say today? Explore ways in which we can express God's welcome in a pandemic?

- iii. I described the response that we are challenged to make to Jesus invitation and welcome. Repentance, belief, baptism and receiving the Holy Spirit. In coming to Christ we all begin a journey of transformation into Christlikeness (2 Corinthians 3:18). Should the local church require anything more of anyone seeking to become church member?
- iv. I cited three ways in which the local church plays an important role in the process of transformation into Christlikeness, witness of others, learning together from the word of God and living in the power of the Holy Spirit. Explore these ways further and consider other ways in which the community of believers can help in the process of transformation.

### **3. Prayer**

- Thank God for his invitation and welcome as seen in his sacrificial love on the cross.
- Reflect on the image of the 'yoke', what it has meant to you and what Jesus is calling you to do today in faithful obedience to his calling.
- Ask God to open your heart and mind to ways of communicating God's welcome to others. Romans 5:5 *God's love has been poured out into our hearts through the Holy Spirit, who has been given to us.*
- Pray for the church local and worldwide that it might be a faithful witness of the invitation and welcome that God extends to all people everywhere.

### **4. Text of the Sermon:**

#### **The Nature of God's Welcome**

Last week we considered, 'Who is Welcome?', Does God's welcome really extend to all people, everywhere? We concluded that it does! The invitation to receive his love and his welcome to those who respond to his love is available to all.

This week are going to look at the nature of God's Welcome, what does it really mean, what are we invited to? Are there limits to this welcome?

What has been the best invitation that you have received? Think about that for a moment. Invited to a party, to be a guest at a celebration of a birthday, a wedding, or other special occasion. Remember those invitations and parties? One day!

Being invited to join a club or an association. You have been chosen to join with others, to take part in what they are doing or in what they stand for. You have been invited and welcomed to their group.

Or you may have received an invitation to meet someone who is considered to be special, a dignitary, a celebrity or even royalty. I have had the privilege of being invited to attend events where royalty has been present, the ones they refer to as 'the minor royals' and have spoken to some members of the royal family but I haven't been invited to the Palace, not yet at least and don't expect to be. But I do know that some amongst us have. You know who you are!

How did you feel when you received these invitations? Pleased, excited, honoured and special. Did you feel like a VIP?

### **The Greatest Invitation**

The greatest invitation ever offered is the one that Jesus made and continues to make, it is an invitation for all people. Our reading is from Matthew 11:28-30.

NRSV: '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.'

Let's read that again and this time from The Message translation:

The Message: "Are you tired? Worn out? Burned out on religion? Come to me. Get away with me and you'll recover your life. I'll show you how to take a real rest. Learn the unforced rhythms of grace. I won't lay anything heavy or ill-fitting on you. Keep company with me and you'll learn to live freely and lightly."

The two readings say the same thing but slightly differently and those differences give us a rich understanding of what Jesus is saying.

Jesus says 'Come to Me'. It echoes' the words spoken to his first disciples, the 12, 'Follow Me'. Simply, follow me. They were called to follow the one whom the Bible describes as the Son of God, full of grace and truth.

In vs 27 of Matthew 11 Jesus says:

Vs 27 ... no one knows the Son except the Father, Jesus is spelling out who he is and the relationship that he has with the Father, that is God himself. And he goes on to say;

and no one knows the Father except the Son and anyone to whom the Son chooses to reveal him. Jesus knows the Father, like no other. Jesus is from God and he is God. So when Jesus says 'Come to me', he is saying I know God the Father and you can know him too through me.

The teachers of the Law, the Pharisees and the Sadducees were telling the people of Israel their ideas of how to be right with God, that they should obey every jot and tickle of the law and all the many rules and regulations that they spoke of. Even though they disagreed amongst themselves how you could do that and differed over the interpretation of the rules and regulations, nevertheless they held this line and insisted that the people behave in certain ways in order to attain God's acceptance. It was legalism, it was exhausting, and it didn't work!

The law and the way that the teachers interpreted it brought a heavy burden upon the people. God's Law had been given to help the people to live well and Jesus came to fulfill the Law. So when Jesus says. Come to me, all you that are weary and are carrying heavy burdens, and I will give you rest. He is telling them that he knows that they are carrying the heavy burden of legalism, and he is

telling them that there is another way. The Message translation of the same verse says Are you tired? Worn out? Burned out on religion? Come to me.

There is a better way. And Jesus knows it and wants them to know it.

The invitation and welcome is offered to everyone. 'Come to me'. There are no exceptions. But then we get to the nature of the invitation and welcome itself. What is Jesus inviting us to? What does his welcome require of us?

Well, the first thing that Jesus offers in his welcome is rest. That sounds attractive doesn't it? Who isn't drawn to that! And no less so in these days. Jesus offers rest, Yes please.

But he doesn't stop there. It's not the rest that we might first think of. He says;

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.'

Many translations of this verse use the analogy of a farmers yoke that was and still is in some countries, used to bind together two oxen for the work of ploughing a field. In the Message translation the word yoke isn't used, instead it says; Walk with me and work with me—watch how I do it. The invitation of Jesus is to come to him and it is an invitation to work with Jesus, to do the things that he does and in the way that he does them. And he promises that as you do that you will receive rest. His rest, his peace which is far more than a lie down, a coffee break! It is for your soul.

The image of the yoke tells us two further things, the yoke is shaped to fit over the shoulders of the two oxen and it fits well for the task, and secondly the yoke holds the two oxen together side by side, so that they can work close together, as one and pulling in the same direction and for the same purpose. Walk with me and work with me—watch how I do it.

As the people strived to find righteousness through obedience to the rules and regulations imposed upon them by their teachers they became more and more enslaved with no rest or reward. Their misunderstanding about the meaning of the Sabbath, illustrates just how far they were from seeing the truth that Jesus was speaking of.

It is only Jesus who can provide the true rest that we long for and need because Jesus has carried the yoke that no one else could carry, only he could bear it and he did it for each and everyone us. He went to the cross and dealt with sin and death so that he and only he can say to you and I, 'your sins are forgiven'. The very same words that he said to the paralysed man carried to Jesus by his friends and lowered down through a hole in the roof and in front of the Pharisees and teachers of the law that we have been speaking about. Friend, your sins are forgiven. And after dealing with that issue in the mans life he heals him, right there in front of them. Which prompts them to ask the right question, Who can forgive sins but God alone?' In response Jesus says; I want you to know that the Son of Man has authority on earth to forgive sins.' So he said to the paralysed man, 'I tell you, get up, take your mat and go home.' And he does.

Come to me, ...and I will give you rest. Eternal rest, and divine peace.

Our acceptance of Jesus invitation requires a response in us.

1. Repentance of our sinful and selfish way of life that has failed to deliver the rest and peace that we seek.
2. Belief in the one who has revealed God's love and nature to us.
3. Baptism in the name of Jesus, a decision to follow Him, to surrender our lives so that we might live, and be ever yoked to Him.
4. And to receive the Holy Spirit that Jesus sends to all who truly seek to follow him, the power of God at work within us to change us and to enable us to do the things that Jesus calls us to do.

But the change doesn't end there, this is just the beginning. Jesus says; Walk with me, learn from me and work with me. We are uneducated when we come to Jesus! We are to be His apprentices, we need to learn from Him. We don't know what we are to do or how to do it. We must learn his ways of doing things, move at his pace, in step with him and do what he wants us to do. Fulfill His agenda for us and by His ways. Always looking to Jesus the pioneer and perfecter of our faith (Hebrews 12:1)

Are you yoked to Jesus? Are you working together with Jesus alongside, are you moving in the same direction for the same purpose? Or are you fighting against the yoke? Resisting and unrepentant?

There is another farming expression that you may have heard of, 'collar proud' Do you know that one? It's a phrase that I picked up from my Dad and it has stuck with me. I searched for it on the internet and couldn't find it! The word collar refers to a horse collar that is part of a harness used to spread the weight of pulling a carriage or plough behind the horse. When working horses had taken a break, and had to put the collar back on again some of them would resist. They knew that once the collar was around their neck they were going to have to work again and so they shook their heads and resisted the farmer putting the collar back over their heads. As a result they were described as being collar proud.

When we accept Jesus invitation to Come to Him, when we are baptized into him we are yoked to Jesus.

You might be thinking, OK I understand that. That is the message from this passage.

But there is more to Jesus invitation, more than an individual response. We don't come to Christ and then live as an island.

## **The Church**

We need to consider what is the nature of God's welcome when we join with others to build a community of faith together in a particular place, a local church. Like ABC.

If someone responds to the invitation that Jesus gives, is there anything further that should be required of them before they can join a local church? In responding to God's invitation in the ways that I have just described have they not already become members of the Body of Christ, the church?

Perhaps an understanding of the relationship between the church and the individual can help us to answer that question.

Peter the apostle puts it like this in his first letter, Chapter 2:4,5

As you come to him, the living Stone (one way that Jesus is described) .....you also, like living stones, are being built into a spiritual house to be a holy priesthood, offering spiritual sacrifices acceptable to God through Jesus Christ.

And he goes on in verse 9 and 10 to say:

...you are a chosen people, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, God's special possession, that you may declare the praises of him who called you out of darkness into his wonderful light. 10 Once you were not a people, but now you are the people of God; once you had not received mercy, but now you have received mercy.

We are called into a personal relationship with God and we are also called into a corporate relationship with the people of God. A spiritual house, a royal priesthood, a holy nation. Now there is of course so much more that we can say about that but we don't have time to do so now. But it is important for us to see that we are not simply a random group of individuals who have heard the same story and then continue to live individual and self-centered lives. We are living stones built together to form a spiritual house, we are inextricably linked and dependent upon one another.

The church is a place of transformation: Here are three ways that this happens;

- Through the witness of others – we help one another, we give personal support and group support, we pray together seeking God's help and guidance. We encourage one another with helpful words, and even rebuke one another when necessary but always with care and godly love. 2 Timothy 2:24-26
- We learn together from the word of God – we learn to follow Jesus in our context, in our day. Learning from scripture, applying scripture.
- We live in the power of the Spirit – the Spirit is at work amongst us. We need to set our sails to catch the wind of the Spirit. We move together in unity by the Spirit.

When we first come to Christ we are, in spiritual terms, weak and immature. God takes us as we are but he doesn't leave us like that, he works in our hearts and minds through His Spirit and begins a

process of transformation into Christlikeness. And he puts us together in community to be helped by others and for us to be of help to others so that together we grow as the body of Christ.

Does our welcome into the church, to join with us here at ABC, does our welcome match up to God's welcome? Do we ask for more of those who would commit to Christian community, more than God asks? Do we recognise the true nature of the church for the transformation of the individual and the witness of the community of faith to the world? How do we need to change to honour Him in this?