

**COMFORTING WORDS**  
**Year A - Proper 9 - July 3, 2005**  
**Rev. Dr. Patrick R. Close**

“Come to me, all who labor and are heavy laden, and I will give you rest. Take my yoke upon you, and learn from me; for I am gentle and lowly in heart, and you will find rest for your souls. For my yoke is easy, and my burden is light.” (Matthew 11:28-30).

Is there anyone here today that could use a little rest or comfort? By the show of most of your hands, I guess we all feel that a little rest would be nice. We live in hectic times. So many things seem to be burdens. It is into this world that Jesus comes today and offers a lighter way. He comes to lift burdens from us so we might carry out our mission in the world.

One of the things I wonder about is our own church. Had our religion become a burden? Some in our church say that we need more rules, more doctrines and dogma. We need to be clearer, they say. All this talk begins to feel like a burden to me. It makes religion feel heavier and heavier. I need a rest from all of this talk.

Take a moment to think about all the weight we are carrying around. The burdens in our lives make us weary. Maybe some of us are unhappy with our work. Perhaps others of us are concerned about our health. Probably a fair number of us are fearful of death. Still some of us carry sadness over the loss of a loved one. Most of us complain that we just don't have enough time. Probably too many of us say that others are not doing it the way it should be done. Whew! That's a load! Can you feel the weight?

I think the problem is that we are faced with too many 'shoulds', and 'oughts' and 'musts'. We have burden ourselves with the voices of too many others. One voice is needed. A way to lift some of the weight is needed. This was also the world of the first disciples. Organized religion had become so crowded with rules and regulations that fewer and fewer people could be part of it. Those in charge, those who interpreted the rules began to exclude more and more people. The weight of religion became a burden that people could not bear. They felt alienated from God and the community.

It is into both worlds, that of the disciples, and ours, that Jesus comes. He offers us a yoke. He offers us comfort. Jesus says that he will make life and religion lighter for us. Jesus holds out the promise of a restored relationship with God and each other ... and all we have to do is take on a yoke.

I'm just old enough to remember what a yoke is. On my grandfather's farm, he used a yoke for plowing. It was a wooden harness that the cattle wore around their neck. I asked once if it didn't hurt the animals. My grandfather told me that the yoke actually made it easier for the animal to do its job. They could pull more and do more with the yoke. It kept the straps and reins from cutting into the oxen. The yoke made the task easier for them.

So it is with Jesus. He offers us a yoke to make life easier, not harder for us. I think is Jesus' way of dealing with some of the guilt that weighs us down in our lives. Guilt often is the most weight that many of us carry. It comes from all those burdens I mentioned

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before. We don't have enough time to be with family, take care of others, and reach out in concern. We are sad and feel guilty that we didn't spend more time with that loved one who died. On and on it goes. The guilt bears down upon us.

Now, you do know what they say about us Episcopalians don't you? We're "Catholic light" ... all the liturgy but none of the guilt! Isn't that what we want? To be freed from what weighs us down, makes us feel guilty? Guilt has a very destructive nature. It leads us to say, "I'm not worthy", "I can't belong", and "There's something wrong with me." Here comes Jesus again. He invites us to put down the yoke of guilt and take on his yoke.

Jesus wants to lighten our load. He is constantly challenging all those rule makers and rule watchers that make us feel heavy. People who are concerned with the rules often miss what God has offered us at that very moment! Jesus says, "Let go and let God." Jesus comes and takes on our form so he can take on our weight, our burden. He wants to lighten our load with love. Jesus offers to get rid of the baggage that drags us down. He says that we don't have to live with the heaviness of our hate, prejudice, judging, fear and blame. Jesus offers us rest, forgiveness, relationships, love and God. These are the ways that our load will be lightened.

I'm always amazed how God reminds me of this each week. On Tuesday, I visited with Father Pedro Guzman, the vicar of St. Andrew's in Crammer Hill. We were talking about how we would get our kids together for the work party in a few weeks. When we finished, he said, "Would you like to see the place?" I wasn't sure what he meant, and then it came to me. The three little boys who died in the trunk of the car the week before lived only four blocks over from the Church. He took me to the site. It was lined with stuffed animals, balloons and candles. We stood silently and prayed for the boys and their grieving families. As I left, Fr. Pedro went to be with the family ... to offer comfort in their time of need. And Jesus was there.

Wednesday morning, I prepared for the 7 am service. It's been pretty light now that summer has come. But I go and prepare for Communion as usual. This day, a woman came in. I didn't recognize her so I introduced myself and asked her name. She is new to our parish, but came to pray for her son who died years ago this day. He was 16. Afterwards, we talked. She said that he was a hemophiliac who developed AIDS from a transfusion at age 4. The mother went on to share how she became part of the Ryan White Foundation. When people who were sorry for her son's death, but would add that "those" other people deserved their disease confronted her, she grew angry. Her response was, "No one deserves that disease." I spoke with her of the AIDS ministry I started in the first Church I served in New Jersey almost 20 years ago. I had a sense of rest and comfort in her that had to be divinely provided.

Finally, Diane and I went to the "Live 8" concert in Philadelphia yesterday. I have a deep desire to see an end to suffering, poverty and disease in the world (especially

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Africa). We listened to the music of some of the world's best musicians who came to call on the rich nations to provide for the poor. I saw here Jesus calling for us to be the vessels of rest, comfort and relief to those in need in the world. I stood in the midst of half a million people, and wondered how I might be part of the solution.

When we take up the yoke Jesus offers, we find our load lightened. We find rest and comfort. We are freed to live life differently ... but there is something more. Jesus invites us to become a Church that caters to hurting, needy and cast out peoples. He expects us to take up his mission as he assumes our burdens. This wonderful passage from Matthew today is an invitation and a commission. Jesus offers to make a difference in our lives, and challenges us to do the same for others.

Jesus invites us in ... let's take him up on his offer ... then let's go out in his name and do the same in the world. Amen.