

Today's Gospel-passage has been prayed at many a bedside and brought comfort to people in pain, in fear, who are close to dying. The promise of rest free from anguish and anxiety, a release to pain-free peace has carried many people in hope and trust across the great divide of death and into eternity.

In the first chapter of the Book of Genesis we hear how God rested on the seventh day and so completed his work. Rest, re-creation is a necessary part of the cycle of work, of creation and anticipates the eternal rest when our labouring is completed.

This comforting history of the passage should not hide its awkwardnesses nor its deeper riches.

"My yoke is easy" is not easily accepted. A burden -'onus' in Latin, is by definition onerous. If it were light it would not be a burden. A yoke is a symbol of subjugation. Jeremiah wore a wooden yoke to tell King Zedekiah, king of Judah, and the people of Jerusalem and the kings of the surrounding nations to submit to the yoke of Nebuchadnezzar, ruler of Babylon for this was God's will; and if they did not submit then they would be destroyed. When the false prophet Hannaniah declared Jeremiah to be wrong and broke his yoke, Jeremiah, at God's command made and wore an iron yoke. Jeremiah was proved right. But it did not save Jerusalem.

The Romans forced their defeated enemies to pass under a yoke as a sign of humiliation to shame them further. The ultimate shameful humiliation was death on a cross. The condemned carried to the place of execution the cross beam. The post was permanently in place. The crosspiece would be carried across the shoulders, as a yoke, on a back lacerated by the scourging that preceded the execution. An easy yoke?

There again the Law, with its myriad prescriptions to be obeyed, was often described by the Rabbis as a yoke, but one that was a joy to carry.

Jesus prays to the Father in words that echo the Lord's Prayer. He thanks the Father for revealing the mystery of the Kingdom, not to the learned and the clever, but to children. Children means nobodies, the ignorant, those of little worth, the unlettered, the people of the land, the poor of Yahweh. At the same time Jesus speaks of himself as one who knows the Father, and who is the embodiment of Wisdom and the Law. Who, the clever might well ask, does he think he is to make such claims. He is an artisan from lowly Galilee, and we know nothing good comes from there.

So here in this passage which is a summary of the entire Gospel message of Matthew, is the paradox which is at the heart of the Gospel: a great reversal; something which today we might call 'counter-intuitive'. It is not what we would expect, especially if we think ourselves to be clever and learned.

The clever are actually foolish; and it is children, the unlearned, who understand best. In God's Kingdom it is the poor who will be empowered and the mighty will be brought low. Those with plenty will get nothing and the poor will be banqueted.

And this is based on the greatest reversal of all: that God, who is beyond human imagining, has become visible, tangible, human without being any less God. And God revealed in Christ has taken the lowest place and lived among labourers, the oppressed, the marginalised and died a death among those most on the edge - the criminals. And he has done so in order that the lowly can be raised.

God is everywhere, but he is most easily met and recognised among the poor, the under-classes, in the favelas and the shanty towns. Where people labour and are overburdened there is God. Which is why these are words are so comforting to those who are in anguish, in pain and close to dying. God in Christ is with them. That is his promise.