

My Yoke
14th Sunday in Ordinary Time (A)
(Mt 11:25-30)

Jesus evokes the image of oxen working in a field when he tells his followers to “*take my yoke upon your shoulders*” (Mt 11:29). The yoke is a wooden device carefully designed to fit over the shoulders of an ox in order to harness its power for labor. For the most effective and efficient work, two oxen are harnessed together. In order not to hurt the animal and compromise its work, yokes have to be customized and adjusted to the particular animal. Yokes also have the effect of forcing two oxen to work as equal partners, without fighting each other. This was the “tractor” of its day, enabling farmers to plough fields and perform other labor-intensive tasks leading to a fruitful harvest.

Jesus often used the image of a field to describe the Kingdom of God (as we will see again next Sunday in the Parable of the Sower). A disciple is a laborer in the field of the Lord, devoting his effort and energy under the master’s direction, to bringing forth a harvest of souls for God.

Jesus tells his followers to take “my yoke” upon your shoulders. Through baptism we become disciples of Christ, throwing off the dominion of Satan and his cruel taskmasters, and taking up the labor which brings life, not death. The Israelites in Egypt were under the “yoke” of slavery. They labored hard, without any benefit to themselves or their families. They were being “worked to death,” and enjoyed no rest.

God promised Moses He would deliver them from slavery and bring them to the Promised Land: “*Say therefore to the sons of Israel, ‘I am the Lord, and I will bring you out from under the yoke of the Egyptians, and I will deliver you from their bondage, and I will redeem you with an outstretched arm’*” (Ex 6:6). The Promised Land is described in Psalm 95 as a place of rest, which those who remain faithful to God will enter, but those who are unfaithful will not experience: “*For forty years [in the desert] I was wearied of that generation and said, ‘They are a people who err in heart, and they do not regard my ways.’ Therefore I swore in my anger that they should not enter my rest*” (Ps 95:10-11).

If the Israelites, liberated from the yoke of Pharaoh, remain faithful to God, He will bring them to the Promised Land, the place of His rest. Likewise, Jesus promises that if we become his faithful followers, taking his yoke upon our shoulders and working hard in the Kingdom of God, we will find rest *in heaven*. Those who serve faithfully will die in peace, and their souls “will find rest” (Mt 11:30). On the other hand, those who are unfaithful will not rest in peace, and their difficult work of salvation will continue in Purgatory (Mt 5:26).

So the first way we will find the “rest” promised by Christ is in heaven, the Promised Land, after the journey and time of trial of this life. But if we take Christ’s yoke upon our shoulders and follow the Christian way of life, we will also experience rest in *this life*. Unlike Pharaoh, or the devil, who is a cruel taskmaster that works his slaves to death, Jesus is “meek and humble of heart.” He is demanding, and the work he requires is long and difficult – the wooden yoke on our shoulders is actually the “cross” which we are to take up in our discipleship of him (Mt 10:38) – but he is not cruel. He shows us the difficult and narrow path which leads to *life*. He brings us to the verdant pastures and cool running streams.

This “rest” of eternal life is already experienced in this life through the Sabbath rest of the seventh day (or better yet, the first Day of the Resurrection). After six days of “work” in bringing forth creation, God “rested,” taking delight in the work of His hands. Likewise, we are commanded to work for our living six days of the week, and on the seventh enjoy the fruits of our labor in a celebration of praise to the Lord.

In every society under the dominion of evil, people are subject to cruel taskmasters, and are “worked to the bone,” worked to death. In those societies formed by the Judeo-Christian tradition of the Bible, however, the economy is subject to the spiritual needs of man, and the work-week leads to the “weekend.” In a Christian society, the shops and factories are shut down on Sundays, so that the primacy of God may be acknowledged, and so that man may enter into this rest by keeping holy the Sabbath.

In true Christian societies, people are able to rest on Sundays and Holy Days (i.e., “holidays”). The Christian way of life is humane. Though we work hard in the field for our master, he is not cruel. And in fact he shows his humility by taking *our* yoke of the Cross upon *his* shoulders in order to bring *us* rest. Unlike every pagan society, the laborer in the Christian world does not exist for the system, the Pharaoh, or the “collective” (as the Communists say). Instead, Christ commands that the economy be subject to the needs of the individual and family.

There is another special meaning to Christ’s parable of the yoke. While the “yoke” applies to every disciple who must take up his cross and follow the Lord, it has a particular significance for those who are married, to such a degree that it is the biblical symbol of the marital vocation. The word “conjugal” derives from the Latin root *jugum*, which means “yoke.” As a yoke joins together *two* oxen for the purpose of working in the field, marriage joins together two disciples in a lifelong partnership for the Kingdom of God. The disciples of the Lord always work in pairs (Mk 6:7, Lk 10:1).

The goal of the Kingdom is a harvest of new souls. Therefore the most important work in the Kingdom is that of raising a family, a labor of love which produces, literally, new souls for God. This labor requires the combined effort of two oxen. Matrimony is the institution that properly creates the single new entity from two individuals which can effectively achieve the work of raising a family.

Here too it is so important to hear Christ's words: "Take *my yoke* upon your shoulders." All too often, individuals and societies replace Christ's yoke with one of their own making. In order to try avoid or minimize what is clearly a demanding sacrifice and difficult commitment, we try to find our own substitutes for marriage more tailored to our ease and comfort (and selfishness). Yet inevitably we discover that man-made yokes are no substitute for the bond created by God and customized exactly for man's nature. They always create more problems than they solve: "marriages" which allow for divorce and polygamous situations; "living together" before formal marriage; "domestic partnerships;" etc.

If the yoke does not fit well on the ox's shoulders it will cause pain and suffering, and the ox will not be able to work effectively. Likewise, we undermine the ability to properly raise families when try out counterfeit yokes, and make things harder. Societies suffer. The Kingdom of God suffers.

Preparing for marriage means taking upon ourselves the yoke given by God through Christ: marriage as defined by the Bible and understood by the Church as a *discipleship*. Thus a couple who wish to marry each other always need to discern their motives and intentions. Do they understand that it is God who imposes the yoke and joins them together, their vows merely give Him consent to do so? And that what God joins cannot be separated, except by the death of a spouse? Do they realize that marriage is *work*, a labor of love for the Kingdom of God? Do they realize that children, new souls for the heavenly Kingdom, are the fundamental goal of the enterprise, and not simply a side "option" if they choose?

Marital preparation requires the discernment of a fitting partner for this work, one whose strength is an equal match, and whose goal is the same. For this reason, St. Paul gives the most fundamental advice to Christians seeking to be married: "*Do not be yoked together with unbelievers*" (2 Cor 6:14). The goal of matrimony is service of the Lord through the raising of a family. It makes no sense to marry a non-believer, unless the non-believing spouse will be supportive of the Christian mission to baptize and educate these children in a Catholic household.

Christ promises that his "yoke is easy and his burden is light." An example of his wry humor. Yet considering the alternative – the tyranny of the devil's false promises and enslavement of selfishness – Christ is true. It may be the long and difficult path, but it alone leads to life, celebration, joy, and the ability to rest.