

NORTH BALWYN UNITING CHURCH

SUNDAY 3 JULY 2011

Rev. Anneke Oppewal

Matthew 11: 16 - 19, 28 - 30

“Free to Rest”

On the farm of my grandparents, when I was growing up, there were still yokes lying about in a dark corner of the dairy. I don't think they were used anymore. I never saw an adult person wearing one. We, as children, would get them out to try them on our shoulders with a bucket on each side, to see if they would work. They were very heavy, and uncomfortable to wear and they didn't seem to make it easier to carry buckets than it was for us to carry the same buckets in our hands. On the contrary, when we tried to race each other to the other side of the yard with a full bucket of water on each side, the buckets would be flying in every direction from the yoke, while in our hands we seemed to have far more control and felt much more confident we would actually get the buckets across to where we were trying to take them. It mystified me. Why bother with something so painful and dysfunctional if you could easily do without?

What I didn't realise of course was that the shoulders of my adult forefathers, or more likely, foremothers, were far broader and stronger than mine, and that these yokes had been made to fit their shape, not mine.

When a yoke fits, and you know how to walk with it, it creates space between the two full buckets of milk and your body, so you won't be sloshing precious milk all over yourself and the space around you while you are carrying them. It doesn't make the load lighter, it just makes it easier and less awkward to carry it. Of course it is important the yoke itself doesn't add too much weight to the burden you are carrying, but if the yoke fits, that little bit of extra weight sets off against the improved ability to handle the load.

A yoke works best if it fits and if it doesn't add too much weight to the load that it helps to carry. Also, the one who carries it needs to grow into it with practice, both in size and strength. Only then does a yoke work and it can be a great tool that enables you to carry things more easily than would be possible without.

What Jesus promises in Matthew 11 is not a life without burden, but a yoke that helps carrying them. A yoke that doesn't add to the burden we are to carry, either in weight, or in discomfort. A yoke that will give us a handle on the load of life otherwise too awkward or too heavy to carry. A yoke that suits our build and the work we have to get done with it. He also promises that, when the day's work is done, he will be there to lift the yoke off our shoulders and provide us with a place of rest. A shoulder massage after the day is done.

This week I have been reading a book called *“The man who broke into Auschwitz”*, by Denis Avey. It is about a British soldier who spends part of the war as a prisoner of war in a camp literally under the smoke of the chimneys of the Auschwitz Birkenau death camps, watching “stripeys”, as they call the Jewish slave labourers, working on the site of LG Farben being beaten and starved to death on a daily basis.

Horrific stories about people making the lives of other people as miserable as they possibly could, sabotaging anything that might have helped them carry their burdens. Rough wooden clogs would

make it impossible to walk and cause welts that would fester, while kapo's would beat anyone black and blue who didn't move fast enough. The clothes and food provided were thin, full of vermin and devoid of any sustenance or warmth, designed to slowly starve and undermine and make sure it would be nye impossible to survive the ordeal.

Until the present day this soldier is waking up with nightmares about what he saw and was made to experience in Auschwitz. He is finally, after struggling with nightmares and mental issues for over fifty years, being treated for Post Traumatic Stress Disorder.

Writing a book about his experiences is part of his own healing and that of many others. A tool, a yoke, that has helped him to carry a load that has nearly crushed him ever since he returned from the war in 1945. Finally finding rest in a place where he can accept and be accepted as the battered, pummeled and beaten human being that he is.

The writing of the book and the sharing of his experiences is a yoke that fits and makes him able to carry, providing him with a place of rest where his weariness is taken off him to make room for healing and peace.

His is an extreme story. And fortunately most of us will never go through that kind of trauma or experience that heavy a burden. But the principle applies to all of us. To be able to carry the burdens we encounter in life, we need tools that enable us to deal with them. We need a yoke that doesn't add to our burdens and one that fits, that is designed well, so it can help with the carrying, instead of hindering it. We also need a place where we can come to rest after the carrying is done. A place where we can be, where we know we are accepted and loved and cared. Unconditionally.

Faith, says Jesus, can offer you that. A yoke that fits and that will help you carry burdens. A place to rest and find healing after you've been beaten and pummeled by the breakers of life.

That is an amazing message in a time that is as anxiety ridden as our own. Faith is a place for us to find tools to help us carry the burdens life will give us to carry.

Offering us a not too heavy and well designed yoke to grow into - an environment, a community, support and guidance to build our strength and to practice our skills for when the time comes.

Offering us opportunities to rest and regain our strength when we need it. Places where we are safe and supported by someone who has seen the best and the worst of life and knows how to comfort and care. That as a person of faith we are invited to live without fear of what may come or what may be.

The communion table is one place to come to rest and regain our strength. A refueling station. A place to enter into God's presence, a place to let go and be.

At that table there is no room for anxiety, or pettiness, or preconceptions about how, or with whom, grace is to be shared. There is no room for the "should" or "should not" of what is "right and proper".

There is room for tears of joy and pain, for music, for our soul to find its dance again, for food and drink to be shared in abundance, for prophets and saints, as well as for ordinary people who are on their journey through life.

Each requiring their own fit to size yoke, each longing for their own, made to measure bit of rest and

recuperation. It is all here, where we meet around the table, creating space for each other to find what we need, relaxing into the presence of the one who holds us in life, and everything that surrounds us, be it good or bad, in his hands.

Offering us the rest we need, helping us to find new strength, working on the fit of our yoke while we gather around the table to receive a bit of TLC. Amen.