

The Rabbi's Yoke

Reflection

There are 613 Jewish commandments, the *Mitzvot*. In the old testament, the Jewish Bible. Was Jesus telling them that the only way to remain in his love was to keep all 613 commandments?

The answer to this lies in the letter from John, which is the first reading set for today. Did you catch it? In 1 John 5, verse 3 John writes, "For the love of God is this, that we obey his commandments. And his commandments are **not burdensome**."

Jesus knew a thing or two about carrying burdens. He told people that if they wanted to be his disciple, they needed to pick up their cross and follow him – this sounds like a massive burden, doesn't it? But what if Jesus meant this to be freeing rather than burdensome? In our Gospel reading Jesus says that "No one has greater love than this, to lay down one's life for one's friends," so maybe this is more about our living than dying, giving your living self in love.

Not everyone carries the same burdens. Youth/ Family/ careers. Later life.

Elsewhere when Jesus talks about carrying burdens, he talks more about them being light. When he sends his disciples out on mission, he tells them not to carry a load of stuff with them, just themselves.

Another time, when teaching those around him, Jesus said:

"Come to me all you who are weary and carrying heavy burdens, and I will give you rest. Take my yoke upon you and learn from me ... For my yoke is easy and my burden is light" (Matthew 11:28-30).

The **yoke** meant something to those listening to Jesus. Although a yoke was known as an agricultural instrument, pulled by animals like oxen in ploughing fields, it was a symbol of a burden, and sometimes oppression. God had warned the Jewish people that they would end up with a **yoke of iron**, in slavery to their enemies, if they didn't stick with God in joy and gladness. Sometimes it was a burden of duty and responsibility, as is the yoke of the Jewish law.

It was the tradition; it was the norm.

Every Rabbi had their own **yoke**, and it was that teacher's interpretation of the law (the Ten Commandments and the books of Leviticus and Deuteronomy). It was a yoke of service to

the law and how they thought you should follow it, that they placed on their disciples. Their teachings often would emphasise all the duties and sacrifice the law demanded and how difficult it was.

When someone asked him which were the most important commandments, he took all the law and the commandments and instead of piling on extra instruction he said:

“You shall **love the Lord your God** with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind.’ This is the greatest and first commandment. And a second is like it: ‘You shall **love your neighbour as yourself.**’ On these two commandments hang all the Law and the Prophets” (Matthew 22:37-40).

That’s it, not the 613 laws of Moses plus all the commentary. Two commandments: Love God, love others and the rest will follow.

This is the **easy yoke** of Jesus, the cross-beam he would have us pick up, lay across our shoulders and carry.

Jesus was telling people that if you spend your lives working your socks off trying to keep the letter of the law, you will wear yourselves out and never manage to keep it. What Jesus offered was a different yoke, an easy yoke.

Let me teach you a new quick and easy Greek word that you can use to impress your friends and wow at parties. Where it reads ‘easy’, the greek word is *chrestos*, which has

many meanings like good, kind and easy, but in relation to a yoke it meant ‘fitting’. An ill-fitting yoke rubs and chafes: you can imagine how this would be more distracting than helpful, constantly needing to shift your position to keep it comfortable. Jesus’ commands about how to live would fit people’s lives, they would not chafe or rub or bruise, they would enable them to do what they were called to without being weighed down, and like a yoke on an ox they would guide the believer the right way.

In John’s gospel love is the central theme running through his writing.

After spending all that time following Jesus around, John was left with one defining message which he thought the whole Church needed to take to heart, to wear as a badge, a banner under which to march: **love**.

So today as we think about the theme of Vocation , let's not forget that at the centre of all that we are called to do love is at the centre.

So we need to:

Love extravagantly like the prodigal father greeting his lost son.

Love with such impartial extravagance like the Good Samaritan caring for one who would hate or scorn them.

Love with the dedication to our call that Philip the deacon did; telling the official from Ethiopia, a eunuch, a foreigner, of the love of God for

them.

Love with the reckless abandon that Jesus showed in loving others; prostitutes, sinners, tax collectors, foreigners and those of other faiths, not judging or excluding but loving and including.

To love like this is costly, it is dangerous, it will make enemies among the religious as it did for Jesus. It will shame others who cannot bring themselves to love like this.

But what choice do we have? Jesus said "This is my commandment, that you love one another as I have loved you" (John 15:12).

Love unconditionally like God loves. Love, because God first loved us.
This is the love we are called to share