

Reg Weeks

Reflection

8 August 2021

St Ronan's Eastbourne

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**Galatians 5:16-25**

**Matthew 11:28-31**

## *The yoke of Yeshua*

**H**ave you ever heard the expression - *reading scripture with Emmaus eyes*? In other words, letting our knowledge of Jesus and his teaching be the guide by which we interpret what we read. You will, recognise the reference to the occasion when Jesus, unrecognised, met with the two glum disciples on their way home to Emmaus. According to Luke 24:27 *Then beginning with Moses and all the prophets, he interpreted to them the things about himself in all the scriptures.*

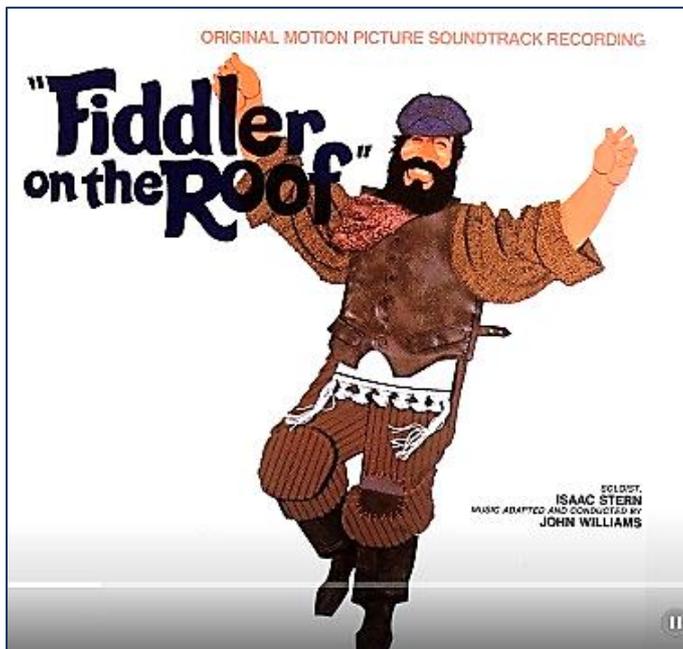
In Matthew's gospel, as we heard this morning, Jesus said *My yoke is easy, and my burden is light*? That's part of a very well-known and favourite passage in the New Testament... But what was Jesus talking about when he said this...?

**I**f you Google Jesus comment, most of the posts show an oxen's yoke. Not so...!

**A**t one stage, I was led to believe it was the band across the man's head, in this image of a Jewish man wearing a prayer shawl. Was this what Jesus meant? That is important but it's not that either...!

**W**e have to go back to Numbers 15. *And God spoke to Moses: Speak to the People of Israel. Tell them from now on they're to make tassels on the corners of their garments and mark each corner tassel with a blue thread. When you look at these tassels you'll remember and keep all the commandments of God, and not get distracted by everything you feel or see that seduces you into infidelities. The tassels will remind you to observe all my commandments, to live a holy life...*





The garment in question isn't just any garment. For Hebrew men it is the prayer shawl called the *tallit*. You can see it underneath Tevye's jacket in *Fiddler on the Roof*. Orthodox Jews still wear it...

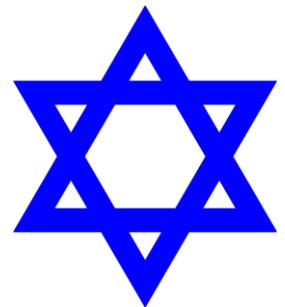
The tassels are reminders of God's commandments, and there is also that strip of cloth you saw across the top of the shawl on the Jewish man's head.

In Hebrew language, that little strip of cloth is called an *atara* – which means 'crown'. Traditionally it was embroidered with the blessing said before putting

on the *tallit*. When they pray, it's over their heads, otherwise it's worn across their shoulders like a yoke.

Today, the *tallit* is treated as an additional garment, worn only during prayer or at worship on holy days. But the *tallit* Jesus wore was an integral part of the everyday clothing for all Jewish men. But there's more... When Jesus said, 'my yoke is easy' he wasn't talking about that either...!

I was fascinated to learn that in the Jewish world of Jesus day, the word 'yoke' had a special meaning relating to the *Torah*. Every rabbi had a list of how they interpreted the dos and don'ts in the *Torah* (the Law of God). The very commandments for which the tassels on the *tallit* were to serve as reminders. The rabbi expected his disciples to follow this list, and it was called 'the rabbi's yoke'.



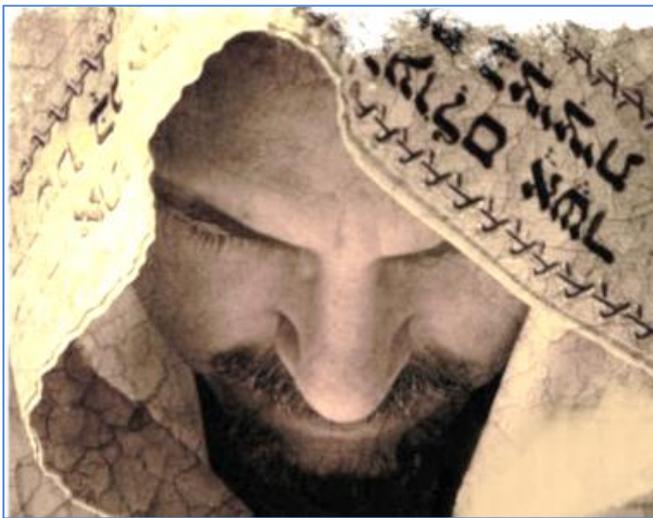
In Matthew 23, we hear what Jesus thought about the teachers of his day. *Do what they teach because they sit on Moses seat but don't do what they do, for they don't practice what they teach. They tie up heavy burdens and lay them on the shoulders of others; but are unwilling to lift a figure to move them!*

It is this, Jesus had in mind, when he said *Come to me all you who are heavy laden, and I will give you rest. Take my yoke upon you and learn from me for my yoke is easy and my burden light.*

In his excellent book about Christians and the Bible, Rob Bell tells us that in Jesus' day when you were a student or disciple of a certain rabbi you chose to follow him because you believed his set of interpretations, his 'list' was the closest to what God actually intended in the scriptures. And when you followed that rabbi, the Jews used to say you were 'taking up that rabbi's yoke'.<sup>1</sup>



Rob Bell goes on to say that the intent of a rabbi having a 'yoke' wasn't just to interpret the words correctly, it was for their followers to live out in everyday life. Rabbis would spend hours discussing and debating with their followers what it meant to live out a certain text.



And here's the really incredible thing. If a student made a suggestion about what a certain text meant, and the rabbi thought the student had totally missed the point, the rabbi would say. *You have abolished Torah* (you have abolished the Law) because, in the rabbi's opinion, the student wasn't anywhere near what God wanted.

But if the student got it right, if the rabbi thought they'd really understood God's intention in the text, then the rabbi would say 'congratulations you have fulfilled Torah' (you have fulfilled the Law).

You may remember Jesus saying - *Don't think that I've come to abolish the Law or the Prophets; I haven't come to abolish them but to fulfil them.*'

What that now means to me is that Jesus was actually saying *I didn't come to do away with the words of God; I came to show people what it looks like when God's word is properly lived.*

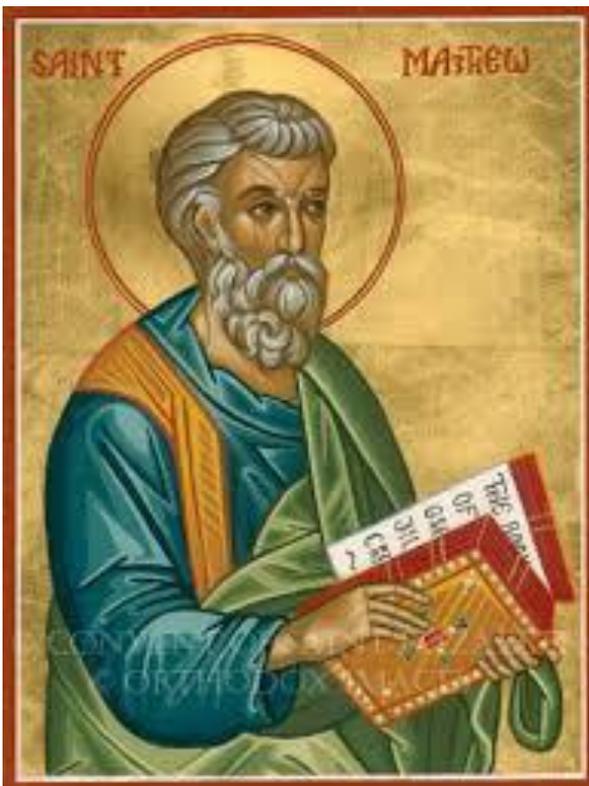
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<sup>1</sup> Velvet Elvis p 93.

When an ordinary (every-day) rabbi taught the yoke of a famous rabbi, Jewish people would say they were teaching in the name of that rabbi. In the name, say, of Rabbi Hillel, or Rabbi Gamaliel, or Rabbi Shammai... Rob Bell goes on to tell us, *...once in a while a rabbi would come along who was teaching a new yoke, a new way of interpreting the Torah. That rabbi was teaching a way he believed was closer to what God intended than the rabbis who had come before him.*

Of course, this was rare and would attract a huge amount of flack unless two other teachers with authority gave the new rabbi their stamp of approval. That's why, to the gospel's Jewish readers, Jesus' baptism by John was so important, not to mention the voice that came from Heaven. It confirmed Jesus' authority and, immediately after, Jesus began to pick up followers...

The Hebrew word for authority is *shmikah*, and a rabbi with *shmikah*... would say things like, 'you have heard it said... but I tell you...' Recall how Jesus said this about forgiveness in place of revenge. Jesus had *shmikah* and what he was saying is 'some rabbis interpret scripture this way, but I tell you this is what God really means in that verse'.



And remember the list I told you each rabbi had, the list of things they'd forbid and permit, well Rob Bell tells us they had a technical term for the endless process of debating what was forbidden and what was allowed. They called it 'binding and loosing'. To 'bind' something meant to forbid it, while to 'loose' something was to allow it. Rabbis would bind certain practices or traditions, and loose others...

And here's the really staggering part... when a rabbi gave his followers the authority to bind and to loose, they called this 'giving the keys of the kingdom'. Notice where Jesus says in Matthew, *'I will give you the keys of the kingdom of heaven; whatever you bind on earth will be bound in heaven, and whatever you loose on earth will be loosed in heaven.'*

While to us this may seem incredible, what Jesus is doing here is giving his followers the authority to make new interpretations of scripture... And they did...

Just think of when the early church had all these gentiles coming in. Huge decisions were being made about circumcision, and about eating food the Torah considered unclean. How they had to make decisions about what it meant to be a Christian, rather than just a Jew. Well, Jesus gave them the authority to wrestle with the Law and to work out new interpretations of scripture. So, they got together to work out what it would look like for millions of people to become Christians.

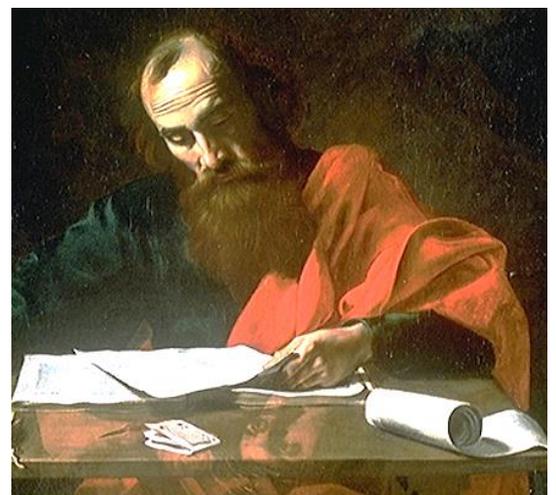
And that's exactly what we still do today, in the Presbyterian General Assembly (which meets in October) and in our Presbytery councils, we listen to the debate, we weigh up what is said in the light of our knowledge of scripture, we pray, and then we vote for what we believe the Spirit is saying to the church. All denominations do this in one way or another... Even in Parish Council, and in study groups, we wrestle with the text, trying to discern what God's purpose really is...

When we take Jesus seriously and live out the authority and responsibility Jesus gives us, we can see our faith communities taking part in a huge discussion that's been going on for thousands of years in the tradition of the rabbis.

For most of church history, people only ever heard the Bible read out loud in a room full of people. They studied and debated and made decisions about the Bible as a community. And if one person went off track with an interpretation, others were there to keep them in check. In Paul's time, it was assumed you had as much to learn from the discussion of the text as you did from the text itself. And Jesus promised the truth would set us free. That's why the early church, when interpreting the scriptures, would say *'it seems right to the Holy Spirit and to us...'*

So, the real question is *whose yoke are you under?* I'm assuming it's the yoke of Rabbi Yeshua - the yoke of Jesus.

Paul had studied under Rabbi Gamaliel but when he wrote his letter to the Christians in Galatia, he had taken up the 'yoke of Jesus' and taught in his name.



From the earliest days of Christianity, Paul's letters gave the church guidance about what it meant to live under the 'yoke of Jesus' in the Jewish, and the gentile, and the secular worlds.

When I first read this morning's section from Paul's letter to the Galatian Christians, I couldn't help thinking that Paul might have been writing to Christians today.

He speaks about discord, dissensions and factions – they're not new in the church - and he doesn't draw any distinction between these things on the one hand, and drunkenness, debauchery and witchcraft on the other. All these things, he says, stem from unredeemed human nature.

Anyone who turns on the telly, opens a paper or checks the news threads on their mobile, will find stories of alcohol and drug abuse, misdirected spirituality, road rage and immorality where we would least expect it, in people who should hold our trust and respect. Such behaviour is just as real today as it was in Galatia. It's the way of the world we live in, as are discord, dissension and factions.

Yet, according to Paul (Galatians 5:22), the fruit of a spirit-led life is *love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, gentleness and self-control*. Some in Galatia believed that only the strict adherence to the religious law could curb human nature, and there are plenty today who advocate tougher laws and stricter penalties to improve our community life.

But Paul likened the yoke of the law, to the yoke of slavery, not to mention the yoke of unredeemed human nature. In Christ you are set free, he said:

- Free of the binding dos and don'ts of any law,
- Free of the driven-ness of our all-too-human nature,
- Free to accept the yoke of Jesus and
- Free to live out its meaning in the power of the spirit.
- Free to love one another,
- Free to forgive, as we are forgiven - for we all fall short
- Free to become blameless and pure, children of God, without fault in a depraved and crooked generation, in which you will shine as stars in the universe, as you hold out the word of life to people who are harassed and helpless, like sheep without a shepherd.

That was Paul's vision for the Christian community, not in Galatia, but in Philippi, and I believe it's God's vision for every Christian community. That's what it means to 'live under the yoke of Jesus.'

**S**o, whose yoke are you under?

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