

“Take My Yoke Upon You”

The Reverend Allison Caudill

St. Luke’s Episcopal Church – Anchorage, Kentucky

Feast of Saint Francis of Assisi – 12 & 13 October 2019

Our Lord calls out to us today with what I would argue is one of the most comforting promises of Scripture. “Come to me, all you that are weary and are carrying heavy burdens, and I will give you rest. Take my yoke upon you, and learn from me; for I am gentle and humble in heart, and you will find rest for your souls. For my yoke is easy, and my burden is light.” These words from the Gospel of Matthew are so precious to us that they appear at every opportunity in our prayer book, said by the priest following the absolution of our sins, read at the close of the day as we say our night prayers in the service of compline, and even in the words of comfort we hear as we bury our beloved dead. Jesus promises us relief, rest, and gentle care.

But woven into this promise is a challenge, a call to action that we must hear even in our darkest and most difficult days. Come to me. Take my yoke upon you. Learn from me. Christ does call us to lay down our burdens before him, to accept his comfort and healing. But that is not where we are to remain. We are not to lay down and fall silent forever, or to neglect our duties to God and one another. Take my yoke upon you. Learn from me. Christ calls us to do the work he has given us to do, to carry upon our shoulders the yoke of relationship with his Father. Jesus is

not being irrationally optimistic about the trials his people will face. He does not offer false promises of a life of ease to his disciples. Throughout the Gospel of Matthew, Jesus tells his disciples they will suffer because of him. The work will be hard, and thankless. They will experience grief, and loss, and fear. Jesus reminds them that he will bear these burdens with them, that he will be there in the tears as well as the laughter.

Saint Francis, the saint we remember today, understood what it meant to become unburdened in order to carry the cross of Christ. Francis was born the son of a wealthy merchant, and grew up in the lap of luxury, using his family's wealth to fund his prodigal playboy lifestyle. Francis enlisted in military service in a misguided attempt at personal glory, and came home from war like so many, a changed man. He had been taken as a prisoner of war and ransomed for a high price as heir to a wealthy family. It is said that during his time as a prisoner, Francis began to receive visions of God, which led to his conversion and decision to lead a life of service to God and God's church. In his most well-known vision, Francis was praying in front of a crucifix in an old church where he had been caring for lepers when he heard the voice of Jesus say "Francis, rebuild my house." At first, Francis interpreted this to mean that he must rebuild the physical building, which had been neglected, and began using his family's wealth to do so. When his father found out, Francis was brought before the local bishop, who ordered him to

repay his father. A theatrical man, Francis shocked all present by removing all of his clothes that were a sign of his family's stature and returned them to his father along with all the money he possessed. From that moment on, Francis wore only a rough tunic, and accepted no money, living on the charity and hospitality of fellow Christians as he furthered his mission to embrace lepers and the poor in the name of the Gospel. Francis endured beatings, illness, and extreme poverty, and died at the young age of 44. He is remembered to this day for his joyous poverty, his embrace of all God's creatures, and his tenacity in sharing the Good News.

The work that Francis did in his lifetime, the burdens that he carried in his efforts to convert all he met to the joy of the Gospel, the risks that he took in caring for the sick and refusing to rely on worldly wealth, may sound unrealistic and even foolish to modern ears. Francis's life may sound unattainable, something to admire but not for any reasonable person to attempt. An oft quoted line in Episcopal circles about St Francis goes like this "Of all the saints, Francis is the most popular and admired, but probably the least imitated; few have attained to his total identification with the poverty and suffering of Christ." I think that's probably true. I don't know of anyone who has walked away from a St Francis Day service and proceeded to sell all of their belongings including the clothes on their backs, and I have to say I'm not planning on preaching to a field of

birds after this. Francis had no interest in being imitated. He was not trying to start a new religion or become the leader of a cult of personality.

Francis did not strip off his fine garments to draw attention to his extraordinary faith, nor did he preach sermons to the birds and the wolves in order that we would remember his name forever. Francis, and so many like him, performed these feats of extraordinary faith because it was the only way they could see to imitate Christ in their own day. Like all of the saints we celebrate throughout our church year, Francis was a human being, an ordinary sinner like you and me. He was around my age when he cast off the mantle of wealth and took on the burden of the cross. He did not have a strategy, or a backup plan, or a support system. He had Christ, calling out to him “Come to me, all you that are weary and are carrying heavy burdens, and I will give you rest. Take my yoke upon you, and learn from me; for I am gentle and humble in heart, and you will find rest for your souls. For my yoke is easy, and my burden is light.” He had the Gospel message, the same one we find in Scripture today. He had the witness of the people of faith around him, some better than others and all flawed, just like us. The thing that made Francis different, that made his life so extraordinary and the reason we still bless our animals on his day, is the way he responded to the call of Jesus, the same call that we hear today and every day. It is

a promise, and a challenge, an icon of the relationship we have with God through his Son.

That is why the yoke is so easy, the burden so light. Because we do not bend under its weight, carrying it on our own. We do not bear the weight of sin and death for ourselves. Contrary to what the world might tell us about our individual productivity, our bootstraps, our successes and failures... Our help is in the name of the Lord. At his feet we are invited to throw down our illusions, our need for control, our idols and our fears. Our gentle, humble Lord wants to carry them for us, with us. The yoke Jesus carries so easily is a hard wooden cross. The burden he calls light is the weight of the world. They are not our rest. The arms holding them are.