

Matthew 11:25-30 Unload your burdens.

Think back to your high school days for a minute. Hand up if your high school had lockers for the students? Most schools do now. All part of the health & safety push. We don't want students to have to carry heavy loads in their backpacks, in case it puts their spines out of joint and they sue the Department of Education... (Perhaps I'm being a little too cynical here) But my high school certainly didn't have lockers. We had to carry a full day's books around with us all day, including up and down many flights of stairs. I still remember the enormous feeling of relief I experienced every afternoon after walking home from the train station, when I could simply dump my bag full of heavy books, and walk burden-free around the house. It was bliss.

We're all familiar with physical burdens. But there are also spiritual burdens to contend with on life. The second part of today's Gospel reading is about unloading spiritual burdens. Let's unpack a couple, and see if we need to unload this morning.

The first burden we encounter in this passage is the burden of intellectualism.

Mat 11:25 At that time Jesus said, "I thank you, Father, Lord of heaven and earth, because you have hidden these things from the wise and the intelligent and have revealed them to infants; yes, Father, for such was your gracious will. "

Jesus was speaking out of his own experience here. As he taught the people, it became increasingly evident that the Rabbis and the wise men rejected him, while the simple, largely uneducated people accepted him. The intellectuals looked down on him with contempt; but the humble welcomed him.

We do need to be careful that we don't misinterpret what Jesus meant here. He wasn't condemning intellectual ability; what he was condemning was intellectual pride. Many of the rabbis & scribes & Pharisees of the day thought they were the only authority on spiritual matters because of their great learning.

Intellectual pride is a very real danger in our increasingly 'educated' society.

I remember a time when kids who struggled at school could find what was called a 'manual' job, where the onus wasn't on brainpower but on skill and experience. They could work as farmhands or labourers or nurses aids, or cleaners. Now, though, a person must gain a certificate to perform even the most menial of tasks. Farmers have to study to gain certificates of competency to be able to use chemicals on their own farms; labourers have to gain workplace health and safety certificates to be able to wield a hammer; those who work in the caring professions need certificates to say they can adequately care for people – the study requirements seem endless!

When it comes to spiritual leadership – again there is an increasing push for people to gain intellectual qualifications. Once a person could be a priest in the Anglican Church with a diploma called a Licentiate in Theology. Now it must be a full academic degree. Of course this is not a bad thing - in fact it is very necessary for our spiritual leaders to have a sound grasp of the Scriptures and their background. But when we fall into the trap of valuing intellectual prowess more highly than spiritual maturity and godly wisdom, we can begin to get things wrong.

The Rector I worked with as a curate had excelled at theological college. I asked him once why he hadn't gone on to do his masters' and a PHD. He told me that he was called to be a priest, not an academic, and though he would have enjoyed more study very much, he felt the Lord wanted him to focus on serving his people. I was impressed by that, as I knew how much he'd loved his study.

As one author put it, "The heart, not the head, is the home of the gospel."

Jesus goes on to say, (v27) "All things have been handed over to me by my Father; and no one knows the Son except the Father, and no one knows the Father except the Son and anyone to whom the Son chooses to reveal him."

Some of the people who have spoken most strongly into my life as a Christian have been people who haven't necessarily had letters after their name, but have been people to whom God has revealed himself: people of great spiritual depth. It has been the maturity of their faith and

their intimacy with God which has made them people really worth listening to.

Our daughter Bethany was what people called 'mildly intellectually impaired'. Academically, she plateaued out at about the age of 12. But she had a simple, lively faith in Jesus, and was very intuitive.

One day, after evening church (this was before I went into the ministry), a lady in the congregation came up to me deeply moved. She told me she had been going through a pretty rough time with her family. During the sermon she'd become upset and had gone out and sat on the steps of the church. She told me she hadn't been out there very long, when our daughter Bethany – then 13 and sitting at the back with the youth group – had slipped outside and sat next to her on the steps. Bethany had sensed this lady's pain. She sat with her a while, and then simply told her that God could help her. The lady was really touched by God through that encounter.

I wonder if we've ever felt that we can't really speak out about our faith because we think we don't know very much? Or if we have ever felt inadequate about getting involved in a particular ministry because we don't feel 'qualified'? Be aware that God speaks through those who *know him* before they *know stuff*. He speaks out of our intimacy with him and our love for him. Those things will simply shine from us – if we let them.

If we are carrying the burden of feeling inadequate this morning – perhaps it's time to put it down, and focus instead on the precious relationship we have with God, and the gifts & passions he has given us, and ask him to show us where we can use them.

The second burden we encounter in this passage is the burden of meeting expectations.

In verses 28-30, Jesus continues, "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."

Jesus spoke here to people who were desperately trying to find God and desperately trying to be good in order to win his approval; people who were finding the whole God-thing impossible and were driven to weariness and despair.

How many of us – even as Christians – set rules and standards for ourselves, thinking that unless we do so and so, God will not be pleased with us. I did it as a youngster in relation to prayer. I felt that unless I prayed a particular set of prayers every night, God would not be pleased with me.

There are people who do the same thing in relation to their own quiet times; or in relation to certain acts of charity they perform; or in relation to other things they do or don't do in their service of God.

The apostle Paul had the same problem. In Romans 7 he says, **“For I know that nothing good dwells within me, that is, in my flesh. I can will what is right, but I cannot do it. For I do not do the good I want, but the evil I do not want is what I do.”**

Unbeliever and believer alike - we can put ourselves 'under law' – the very thing Christ died to save us from. We set standards and expectations of ourselves, and we get discouraged when we fail time & again.

Jesus says, **“Come unto me all you who are weary & carrying heavy burdens and I will give you rest.”** His invitation is to those who are exhausted from their search for peace with God.

Jesus invites us to take his yoke upon our shoulders. The Jews used the term “the yoke” for “submitting to”. They spoke of the yoke of the Law, the yoke of the commandments, the yoke of the Kingdom, the yoke of God. But it may well be that Jesus took the words of his invitation from something much nearer to home than that.

Jesus says, "My yoke is easy." The Greek word translated "easy" can also mean well-fitting. Back then in Palestine yokes for oxen were made of wood. When a yoke was needed, measurements were taken from the ox. The yoke was roughed out, and then by trial and error, it was carefully adjusted so that it would fit well and not chafe the neck of the ox. Each yoke was tailor-made to fit a specific animal.

Jesus says, "My yoke is easy – it fits well." What he means is: "The life I give you is not a burden to chafe you; it is made to measure to fit you." Whatever God calls us to is made to fit our needs and our abilities exactly.

There is an old story which tells how a man came upon a little boy carrying a still smaller boy, on his back. The smaller boy was lame. "That's a heavy burden for you to carry," said the man. "That's not a burden," came the answer. "That's my little brother." Simon & Garfunkel made a great song of it.

William Barklay says that "The burden which is given in love and carried in love is always light."

Do we need to unload a burdensome self-made yoke this morning, and take on the yoke of Christ?

Jesus invites us all this morning to unload – to unload any sense of inadequacy we might feel as his servants: he has given us himself – what more could we need? And he calls us to unload the harsh expectations and standards we impose upon ourselves. Once again, he simply calls us to follow him – and as we take on his yoke, our heavy burden becomes light.

Let's pray.