

# And I will give you rest

Pitt Street Uniting Church, 9 July 2017

A Contemporary Reflection by Rev Dr Margaret Mayman

Pentecost 5A

Zechariah 9: 9-12; Matthew 11:16-19, 25-30;

Contemporary Reading: "*The Peace of Wild Things*" by Wendell Berry.

This reflection can be viewed on You Tube at <http://www.pittstreetuniting.org.au/> under "Sunday Reflections" tab

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This morning I'm going to talk about rest. About the promise in Matthew's gospel where Jesus assures the disciples. "*Come to me, all you that are weary and are carrying heavy burdens, and I will give you rest.*"

Rest. Rest. So, just a heads up.

This week it appears that I am going to talk about a topic about which I am not at all well qualified to comment. But through the conversation with Gillian Hunt who curated the liturgy this morning, and the liturgy resource we both read in preparation for today, it seems that rest is what I should talk about. About Jesus who calls us to discipleship, to an exacting, demanding, challenging way of being in the world, and who also promises us rest. I think that I'm talking about it because I need to learn about it.

*"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."*

Yokes and burdens, I understand. Lately I am quite often tired and weary. I imagine that many of you are too. Some of you are good at spotting it in others, like the congregation member, who shall remain nameless, who asked me a couple of weeks ago if I was getting enough sleep. When I asked why she asked, she said I looked tired. Oh fabulous!

Weariness is epidemic. Like a virus we've carried in our blood so long, so deep, that it's a chronic condition. We adapt to it. Some of us have manic moments when we get heaps done, and then we have lethargic times. Tiredness contributes to irritability. To jangled nerves and heavy limbs.

Our world is frantic. With ever increasing productivity requirements, we push ourselves to the brink. Yet great activity, whether in work or leisure, has not increased our sense of self, rather it has diminished our ability to quietly ponder the world as it goes by. And to ponder our place in the world.

Though we are promised rest, many of us are constantly restless. We have balls to juggle (often I find myself apologising for dropping one of them). We have a hundred dikes with holes that need to be filled, and thousands of cats to herd. Life is whirring, whirling, wearying busyness. It makes you tired. Just talking about it makes you tired.

The causes of tiredness are real. We live in a fast-paced city. The traffic moves quickly. People walk erratically, half of them with their heads down in their smart phones. You snooze, you lose. Expectations about productivity are intense for people in our city. Being connected electronically to everything, all the time, via the internet, means it is possible to work day and night. And even the things we might tell ourselves are restful, like cruising Facebook, may contribute to anxiety and often to insomnia.

Recently, I've heard myself talking about retirement as the time when I will rest. We call the places where elderly people live "rest homes." Is the implication that rest is only appropriate for the very elderly and the unwell? The Protestant work ethic has gone deep into our culture and into our souls.

Our lack of rest damages our sense of self and our relationships with family, friends and colleagues. We lose the art of contemplation. Day-dreaming is considered childish instead of being recognised as regenerative.

We want to be Mary, the one who sits at Jesus feet, absorbing wisdom and peace, and yet we live as Martha, a woman with a massive to-do list and a rising sense of resentment.

But there, in the gospel, alongside the challenging call to discipleship is the promise of rest. The promise of resting in God, resting in the power, the presence, the sacred energy that is the source of all life.

So yes, I'm advocating for more rest. But the passage in Matthew's gospel is not about rest in the abstract. The context is discipleship.

Mark Buchanan says that the call and promise of Jesus to rest is not an invitation to idleness. Jesus, he says, does not want to lull you to sleep. Instead Jesus wants to awaken you. The call to discipleship that is the context of the promise of rest, is a call to be fully alive.

The "*easy yoke*" that Jesus promises is all the more perplexing in light of the strenuous demands placed upon disciples in the previous chapter of Matthew, and the rejection of Jesus depicted in the passage we heard. How can Jesus offer rest and yet ask so much?

I think that weariness sometimes comes from having nothing at all to do that really matters. The easy yoke means having something to do: a purpose that demands your all and summons forth your best. It means work that is motivated by a passionate desire to see God's reign realized. It means work toward a certain future in which all of God's dreams will finally come true. Jesus' promise is that we are never alone in this work.

The burdens that we bear, personal and pastoral, individual and communal, societal, national, and global, are many. There are burdens related to the life of this church community at the moment. Massive amounts of money required to care for this heritage building that far outstrips our capital reserves. Our operating budget in crisis because of the loss of the tenant from Pilgrim House that funded our office administrator, leaving some of us stretched physically and emotionally.

The reports from the recent census tell us what we already know about declining denominational numbers. Sometimes we think that if ministers and lay people could just work harder, the church might be saved. But perhaps it is not up to us to save it.

If we are truly resurrection people, death is not the end. It might be necessary to ask some hard questions about the source of our fatigue -- to what extent is it the result of misplaced and misguided perpetuations of church? Where is the call to discipleship taking us now?

I suspect that a lot of our weariness comes from holding up structures that need to change, defending doctrines that long ago demanded to be reimagined, and maintaining ecclesial institutions that are in need of reform. The challenges that face the church are of the kind that mandate imagination, creativity, and energy -- all of which are difficult to engage when fatigue has taken hold.

Much of what the institutional church chooses to pay attention to, to talk about, to put efforts toward is neither meaningful nor life-giving.

The answer is not to work harder, says Jesus. The answer is to allow ourselves to rest. To rest in God.

Sometimes we try too hard, when in reality there might be a way that is less complicated and less physically and emotionally demanding.

There is a wonderful scene in the first Lord of the Rings movie (I confess I didn't ever read the books and I only saw the movie -- and kind of fell asleep toward the end of it - so don't expect me to be an expert on Tolkien). In this scene, the fellowship of travellers must enter into the ancient mines of Moria for a perilous but ultimately redemptive journey. It is their one and only way through the treacherous mountains to a place of safety.

The problem is that the huge stone doors leading into the mines are sealed shut. Over the arch of the door is written, in Elvish, an inscription:

*"The Doors of Durin, Lord of Moria. Speak friend and enter."*

The hobbit Merry asks the wise and ancient leader Gandalf, what this means. *"It's quite simple,"* he says. *"If you're a friend, you speak the password and the doors will open."* Gandalf then musters his powers and in a deep, solemn voice, utters an ancient incantation.

Nothing happens. Nothing whatsoever.

He speaks again, in a powerful and authoritative voice. Again nothing. He starts losing it a little. He pushes the door. He shouts. He gets angry. Nothing.

Hours later, they're all still there. Bored and anxious. Gandalf muttering incantations like a crazy person. The door hasn't budged. Gandalf sits down, his back to the door. He is weary and defeated. Frodo the hobbit looks up and reads the inscription once again: *"Speak friend and enter."*

*It's a riddle,"* he says. *"Gandalf, what is the Elvish word for friend?"*

Gandalf is puzzled and a bit annoyed.

*"Mellon,"* he says.

And as he utters this one word, after hours of erudite incantations, the door swings open.

Sometimes we try too hard. We push, we shove, we shout, we scheme, we even pray. And all we do is wear ourselves out.

What Jesus is calling us to is a simple but life-transforming response. Speak *friend* and enter.

In this passage Jesus has given us a new picture of God. God is the one who bears our burdens. God is the one who shows up in our need. God is the one who comes along side us. Nothing demonstrates this more than the cross – God’s willingness to embrace all of life, even to the point of death. God’s profound love and commitment, love and commitment that will not be deterred...by anything.

And all of this should shape not only our picture of God, the God we know in Jesus, but of what it means to be a disciple of Jesus.

The rest of which Jesus speaks is not individualistic psychobabble. Jesus isn’t saying, “*take care of yourself; if you don’t, who will?*” or “*Put on your own oxygen mask before helping others*”. Jesus is saying that on the journey of discipleship, on the path that is ‘the way’, Jesus is saying: “*I am with you.*”

Perhaps what we need is not so much another command – *Rest more! Take care of yourself!* – but rather the reminder that God will be with us – and that God shows up where we least expect God to be: in the need of our neighbour, in the person who doesn’t look anything like us, in the person who believes and thinks and acts differently than we do.

When we live as disciples, we find that God is already there. When we turn away from our needs and anxieties, we find God and find our own lives again.

In the midst of too much to do, of overwhelming challenges of work, or church, or health or family life, we are drawn out of anxiety and fear, to faith. Faith which is not about believing a list of things, but rather about living in trust.

This promise of rest in this gospel passage is not about a lie in – though that’s never a bad thing. It is a deep sense of knowing ourselves to be loved, a deep sense of knowing ourselves to be enough. We are called to rest in the sacred source of life and love. For through resting in God comes the possibility of risking for God, a new future for ourselves and for our community, and for our world.

Rest now in this divine presence, and know the promised blessing of Deep Peace...