

**“Yoked to hope” a sermon based on Zechariah 9:9-12 and Matthew 11:16-19, 25-30 preached at Knox Church Dunedin New Zealand on 5 July 2020 by Kerry Enright.**

Hopes ran high. The people had come through a long and difficult period. They had faced down major challenges and it seemed as if life was improving. And they waited and waited and yearned and yearned for that new life, but life didn't improve. How do you hold on to hope and become what Zechariah calls “prisoners of hope” when there is much about which to despair. How can hope keep calling us forward when it's easier to be cynical, more natural to give up?

I refer to the reading from Zechariah because I want us to know that we are borne along as part of a world-wide movement of hope thousands of years old. Let me give its background. The temple had been destroyed and people had been taken into exile, and now seventy years later the descendants of the exiles were returning to their ancestral homeland. They contemplated independence and the restoration of the monarchy, but their dreams never materialised. The foreign kings of Persia ruled for another 200 years, only to be replaced by Greek and then Roman rule.

A prayer in Nehemiah expresses how they felt. “Here we are, slaves to this day ... The land's rich yield goes to the kings whom you have set over us ... they have power also over our bodies and over our livestock at their pleasure, and we are in great distress.”

Long years of yearning met with nothing but unbearable subjugation. How could they continue to hope when the fulfilment of their hope seemed less and less likely as the centuries rolled on? Centuries! Such a heavy yoke!

In our own land, for a period of time there was a remarkable national spirit. Collectively we stopped the spread of COVID-19. How inspiring to see across our country, people helping each other. Maybe, we thought, that with this spirit, we could achieve more, not just addressing a virus but many of our other national challenges. A buoyant spirit that would take us forward.

And then something happened. Our public health system run down over a long period, struggled and sputtered. Despite there being no community transmission, the struggles were highlighted and amplified. We had to blame

someone even though we know that a public health system develops over years. Then it became politically partisan, mirroring what we have seen overseas. The short term blame buried the long term possibilities. There was a downward spiral that chewed up our hope. Our memory of acting together despite mistakes was picked apart until we wonder how we ever hoped for a different future. Which leads to weariness and the struggle to carry burdens, and a longing for rest. Such a heavy yoke!

How often have we seen this in organisations and churches and societies? So let's look to Zechariah again. We read that the one to change our fortunes, the hopeful one, identifies with people who are poor and oppressed, that the hopeful one comes on a donkey not a war horse, that the hopeful one leads people on to the streets.

Matthew names what Jesus faced, that no matter how often truth was spoken, people would not receive it. John the Baptist came, abstemious, disciplined, highlighting injustice, and people accused him of having a demon. He wailed and the people did not mourn. By contrast, Jesus came, eating and drinking and people called him a glutton and drunkard. He played the flute and the people would not dance. John was too serious; Jesus was not serious enough.

Jesus points to an underlying, persisting, powerful, feminine presence in our world, the figure of Wisdom, with a capital W. She stands on the street corner speaking truth and calling for justice. Despite how people dismiss John and Jesus, she is at work in our world, and we are invited to join her. Wisdom is a power and a presence active in our society. Wisdom helps us understand life beyond sensory perception. In our faith, we believe Christ is the Wisdom of God.

This invitation comes from the Wisdom of God, from Jesus –

“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.”

In Proverbs, Wisdom beckons us to a feast she has prepared– “Come, eat of my bread and drink of the wine I have mixed. Lay aside immaturity and live, walk in the way of insight.” Proverbs 9:5-6.

By using the image of the yoke, Jesus took up a Rabbinic image, to highlight the importance of teaching and the gift of Wisdom. In following Jesus, we are yoked to Wisdom. Living the way of Christ is not to be a heavy burden or a tiring load. It's not about keeping a set of moral standards or complying with a list of laws. It is rather about enjoying a relationship in which he steadily influences us. We become yoked to him, to his life, his power, his work in the world.

This power transforms our desires into passions for God's just and powerful reign in the world. We don't need to pretend that we are self-made people. We don't need to imagine we are left to our own resources to achieve society's goals of wealth and personal success, goals that exhaust us, make our shoulders sag, leave us restless and anxious.

We are invited instead, to receive the yoke of Christ, to believe that Wisdom is at work in our world, taking up our longing and yearning and praying and working for life that is abundant for everyone.

The yoke of hope. We look back on millions of people who have carried this yoke before us over thousands of years, believing that the world will one day be as God wants it.

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