

Fourteenth Sunday

Come to me all you who labour and are overburdened and I will give you rest. What type of rest? The Lord adds: "If you shoulder my yoke." What is his yoke? That is the cross. And if we bear it with humility and gentleness, not arrogance and harshness, then our souls will find rest. Note that Our Lord bids us to come to him when we are fed up and cannot cope, which is another notion for overburdened. We come to him and learn from him whose heart is gentle. When we finally encounter him – for some dawdle in their approach being distracted with worldly placebos to solve problems – then, we are obliged to share his yoke. What is a yoke, as such? One hundred years ago, before machinery, when the agrarian lifestyle warranted that bullocks and horses worked the land, yokes were common equipment in most sheds. They were made of wood and leather and joined the animals together at the neck and shoulder. The yoke, in a certain sense locked or harnessed one animal to another, so that they worked as a team. If the stronger beast turned right, so too did the other; if it stopped then both stopped.

So, when we cannot cope, the broken relationship is too much, the addiction is too embracing, the debts are too high, we come to the Lord and we yoke ourselves to him. He does not promise to take away the burden but he does promise to help us bear it, to be supported by him. This yoking process involves three steps. 1. In being yoked to him, he leads us and we follow, hence the reference to humility. 2. Once our heart is next to his in the yoked fashion, compliant with his will, we receive his support or grace – the G factor – and we become more gentle with others. 3. The outcome of his strength and presence gives rest to our souls, not always our bodies and what was overly burdensome becomes lighter and easier.

It sounds good – a perfect recipe to solving those ugly issues. But does it work? As always the proof is in the pudding! One classic example is noted in the life of St Maria Goretti. We recall that she was born in 1890 the third of seven children whose father had just died and the family was starving, and thus, was taken in as workers on a farm. The owner of the farm had a son called Alessandro, we will call him Alex, who was filled with lust for Maria and when she was not willing to be complaint with his demands, he broke into a violent rage and stabbed her fourteen times. Although the family managed to transport her to the hospital, her life could not be saved. Before dying, whilst receiving the last rites, she forgave Alex for his crime and prayed that he might be saved. He was sentenced to thirty years in jail for murder. During the first seven years he was filled with hate, anger, violent conduct and wanted nothing to do with God. In short, he was fed up and overburdened. Maria now in heaven, appeared in a dream, or vision, and rebuked him for his behaviour imploring him to seek God's forgiveness, so that he could go to heaven. After that mystical encounter, he did convert to the Lord, went to Confession and took on the yoke of his prison sentence. By God's grace, he became more gentle of heart and a model prisoner.

Within this context, we note that Maria's mother, Assunta, was truly burdened after her daughter's death. Just think about her plight for one moment. No husband. No centrelink, no family support or relatives close by. Abject poverty and trying to feed her children by manual farm work. Now, her older daughter has just been murdered by the employer's son. What an enormous burden she was asked to bear. I am convinced that she came to Jesus who helped her bear this burden by sharing the yoke. I know that must have happened because her heart was just so gentle and humble, having learnt from Lord, over the years. You see, once Alex had done his time, he sought out the whereabouts of Assunta and the family – for he wanted to ask for forgiveness. Now, imagine the scene of Alex knocking at the door. She was not obliged to see him or speak with him. It would have been ok had she not opened the door. Yet she did and she willingly forgave him. What a humble and gentle heart! Moreover, being Christmas time, they both went to Midnight Mass and knelt side by side, murderer and mother, to receive Holy Communion, to receive the Prince of peace.

Eventually Maria was canonized in 1950 with Assunta present, and the family. It was the largest canonization ceremony in the history of the Church, and the first time, when a parent was present. Some say Alex may have attended. At any rate, he became a lay brother in a monastery for the rest of his life where he died in 1970 being at rest in his soul having shouldered Christ's yoke for so many years.