

Come To Me All You Who Are Weary

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Come to me, all you who are weary and are weighed down, and I will give you rest.

Take my yoke upon you and learn from me,
for I am gentle and lowly in heart, and you will find rest for your souls.

For my yoke is easy and my burden is light.

(Mt 11:28-30)

During Great Lent we intensify our efforts to come to the one who calls us. It is a time for us to “cast all our cares on Christ for he cares for us” (1 Pt 5:7), and to “lay aside every earthly care as we receive the king of all” (Divine Liturgy). Sometimes, however, it feels as if our increased efforts are the very things that weigh us down instead of lightening our load, indicating that we have subtly let our spiritual effort succumb to self-reliance. Jesus’ words quoted above redirect us to a life-giving Christ-reliance as we continue on our path to Great and Holy Pascha.

Come to me: Christ *invites* us to come to him. This is always his approach. He calls his disciples with the simple words “follow me” (Mt 4:18-22; 9:9; Mk 1:16-20; 2:14; Lk 5:27; Jn 21:19-22). He describes himself as the shepherd who calls his sheep, who in turn recognize his voice and follow him (Jn 10:2-4). He invites us to the wedding feast (Mt 22:1-14; Lk 14:16-24; Rev 19:6-9). Most poignantly, he speaks to all of us when he instructs the lukewarm Laodiceans: “Behold, I stand at the door and knock. If anyone hears My voice and opens the door, I will come in to him and dine with him, and he with me” (Rev. 3:20).

The first and most important aspect of Christ’s invitation is that *he* initiates, not us. He is shining down his grace upon us, the righteous and the unrighteous. We do not need to direct our efforts toward getting his attention; he is already attentive to us. We only need to respond to his voice: to come, to follow, to open. Rejection of his invitation, as much by negligence as by blatant rebellion, is what engenders the wearied isolation of self-reliance in place of the refreshing communion of divine dependence. Many who were invited to the marriage feast offered excuses for why they would not come, devoting themselves to a life of transitory toil (Lk 14:18-20). So too, “The Pharisees and lawyers *rejected the will of God for themselves*, not having been baptized by him” (Lk 7:30; emphasis added). When we resist God’s call by not responding, we are rejecting his will for us, rejecting the grace he longs to pour into our hearts.

As the good Shepherd searches for his lost sheep, Christ invites us with the words, “Adam, where are you?” (Gen 3:9). Our response to this question ought not be complicated with qualifications, explanations and excuses, but simple. When God called Abraham, he replied, “Here I am” (Gen 22:1,11). When God spoke to Jacob in a dream, he replied, “Here I am” (Gen 31:11; 46:2). When God called to Moses from the burning bush, he replied, “Here I am” (Ex 3:4). When the Lord called the young Samuel, he replied, “Here I am” (1 Sam 3:4-16). When Isaiah heard the voice of the Lord asking ‘Whom shall I send?’, he replied, “Here I am” (Is 6:8). When the Lord spoke to Anninias in a vision, he replied, “Here I am” (Acts 9:10). The simple response we need to our Lord’s invitation is, “Here I am.” There is no purer way to offer ourselves than this. Take me as I am, here and now.

All you who are weary and weighed down: While Jesus' invitation is always going out to everyone, we are often better able to hear it, and to respond to it, in times of need, or rather, in those precious moments when we are *aware* of our need. We always need him, but we are not always aware of that need. A weary and heavy soul is often the divine tool to awaken our awareness of our need for him. Rather than being a hindrance to accomplishing more things on our to-do list, weariness and heaviness is the divine reminder, the invitation itself, to return to the sheepfold from which we have wandered, to return to the good Shepherd who is calling us through our heightened awareness of our need.

The word for weary, *kopiaio*, means to labor or to toil, but it frequently carries the sense of *growing weary*. When Jesus comes to Jacob's well in Samaria, we're told he was *weary* from his journey (Jn 4:6). When he asks Peter to go out into the deep waters to cast his nets, Peter—expressing the weariness of a night of fruitless labors—replies, “Master, we *toiled* all night and caught nothing” (Lk 5:5). Contrast this with the lilies of the field that grow *without toiling*, that is, without becoming weary (Mt 6:28-29; Lk 12:27), suggesting in context that it is the cares and anxieties of life that weary us.

Similarly, to be burdened, *phortizo*, is to be loaded or weighed down. The only other place it is used in the New Testament is when Jesus laments the lawyers who “*load* people with burdens hard to bear, and you yourselves do not touch the burdens with one of your fingers” (Luke 11:46). The noun form, *phortion*, is used for the freight or cargo that would be loaded onto a ship (Acts 27:10), and used metaphorically of the weight of expectations and demands we can place on others (as well as on ourselves), as in Jesus' lament of the lawyers who won't touch the burdens they place on others.

Our sins are a weight too heavy to carry alone (Gal 6:1-5). The hymns of the *Triodion* sung during Great Lent are filled with allusions to our misdirected and weary-producing toil as well as the paralyzing weight of sin. These physical and psychological symptoms of wayward living are precisely the reminders, the invitations, to return to the life-giving source of inner stillness and enduring strength. The first thing we should think about when we are feeling weary and weighed down is that Christ is inviting us: Come to me just as you are; don't try to remove your heavy load on your own.

I will give you rest: When we are weary and weighed down we want rest, and this is exactly what Jesus promises us in return for coming to him. The word used for rest, *anapauo*, means ‘to cause to cease or stop, to halt’, and thus ‘to cause to rest’. Jesus is stopping the movements, both inner and outer, that are responsible for our weariness and thus bringing about a state of rest in us. The very act of coming to him with the simple words, “Here I am” or “Thank you, Lord, for reminding me of you; help me,” initiates the relief from our weary and burdened disposition. The acknowledgement that we want his help prompts the release of the toil and burden of trying to fix ourselves.

When the disciples were overwhelmed by the people coming to see Jesus, he said to them, “Come aside by yourselves to a deserted place and *rest* a while. For there were many coming and going, and they did not even have time to eat” (Mark 6:31). Like a good shepherd, he takes care of all our needs, makes us lie down in green pastures, leads us beside still waters, and restores our soul (Ps 22/23:1-3). The seeds of that rest enter our lives immediately upon responding to our Lord's invitation because we are turning from the temporal to the eternal, from the transitory to the enduring, from the past and the future to the present, from the physical and the psychological to the spiritual.

Take my yoke upon you and learn from me: While responding to Christ's invitation *initiates* the relief and healing of our troubled souls, the seeds sown in our heart only sprout and grow as we enter into the process of *learning from him*. Our temptation is to learn from everyone except him. Our world is full of messianic voices offering us instruction on how to cure the ailments that afflict us. Jesus himself warned that many would come masquerading as the Christ and directing us to pseudo-kingdoms (Mt 24:4-5, 23-26; Lk 17:23). Receiving the rest that can only come from him requires that we learn from him, that we let him become our teacher. "You are not to be called teachers for you have only one teacher, the Christ" (Mt 23:10). "The Comforter, the Holy Spirit, whom the Father will send in my name, he will teach you all things, and remind you of everything I told you" (Jn 14:26). So we ask Christ to be our teacher, even as the disciples asked him to teach them to pray (Lk 11:1), and as the Psalmist repeatedly enjoins, "Lord, teach me your precepts" (Ps 118/119:12). Responding to Christ's invitation involves coming to him as a student desiring to be taught by him.

And how does Jesus teach us? Not so much with didactic and abstract instruction as with disciplined training. We are not being prepared to pass an exam, but to live life. We are being taught the skill of living and not merely a body of content. It is for this reason that his first instruction is, "take my yoke upon you." A yoke is a wooden board placed over the neck of one or two animals to pull a plow for the tilling of fields or to turn a millstone for the grinding of grain. The yoke constrains and directs the animal's efforts toward a certain goal, and hinders movement that is antithetical to that goal. Of course, an animal can struggle against it—wearing itself out by lack of co-operation. In time, however, it will be trained by the yoke and experience the freedom of co-operation.

When we come to Christ to be taught, he will constrain us in various ways in order to direct our efforts toward the human end of love—love of God and love of neighbor—for that is what we were created for. Learning the skill of love will be a *practical* matter; we will be directed and guided to *act* in co-operation with Christ. As a hieromonk once told me, "love" is a verb. We love by doing, by acting, by practicing what Christ our teacher gives us to do. In time, we come to experience each and every circumstance in life to be Christ's schoolroom, his uniquely designed lesson plan for us at that moment.

Among the many lessons he has for us, a foundational one is: "Be still, and the Lord will fight for you" (Ex 14:14). He is teaching us inner stillness so that we can let him fight the battles that are wearing us out; to be calm on the inside even when chaos reigns on the outside; to not let the exterior storms become interior storms. We won't learn this type of rest by being insulated from the trials of this world, but by experientially learning that the peace and joy that Christ gives can neither come from nor be taken away by anything the world throws at us. He *gives* us rest by *teaching* us how to rest by *yoking* us to himself.

I am gentle and humble in heart: Most of us want rest from our weariness, but we don't want a yoke that limits our "freedoms." We want refreshing stillness on the cheap. We fear being controlled by another. Jesus reminds us that he is not a narcissistic task-master who abuses us for his own ends; rather, he is gentle and humble in heart, that is, at his very core. Gentleness and humility characterize who he is. His "yoked-teaching" is not to "lord it over us," as the world's expressions of power-governed relationships would have us fear, but is instead to serve us and to offer his life for us (Mt 20:26-28; Mk 10:42-45; Lk 22:25-27; Phil 2:5-11).

We need not be afraid of learning from him, of taking on his yoke, because his perfect love casts out all our fears (1 Jn 4:18)—a love that is grounded in gentleness and humility, in self-sacrifice and co-suffering. This is not simply his *way* of teaching us, but it also is *what* he teaches us. He is making us like him, gentle and humble; he is conforming us to his likeness; he is helping us release the worldly forms of power and value in order to become gentle and humble vessels of fearless love.

My yoke is easy and my burden is light: When our Lord’s gentleness and humility take root in us, we come to experience that his yoke is indeed easy and that his burden is indeed light. Learning, being trained by our Teacher, is a daily process. In the *Blessings for the Departed* we sing, “You that painfully walked the narrow road; all who during life *took up the cross as a yoke* and in faith followed me, come, receive heavenly crowns and those things prepared for you.” Christ’s easy and light yoke is nothing less than, and nothing more than, our cross that we pick up *daily* to follow him (Lk 9:23). And where does he lead us? To Golgotha, to be crucified *with him* on Great and Holy Friday, to be buried *with him* on Great and Holy Saturday, and to rise *with him* on Great and Holy Pascha. We are co-sufferers with Christ being yoked with him so that we might be healed, raised and glorified with him. Our life is no longer the weary burden of self-reliance but the refreshing rest of Christ-reliance.

We have not yet arrived at this state of divine rest, but we are en route; this is our lenten journey. As we keep coming to him—keep responding to his call with “Here I am”—we increasingly taste and see that the Lord is indeed good, and that the crosses of our life are his loving hands shaping and forming us by our responsive co-operation with him. In time, we will notice something strange happening to us. We see it expressed in Peter’s response to Jesus’ request to go out into the deep waters: “Master we toiled all night and caught nothing. *But at your word I will let down the nets*” (Lk 5:5; emphasis added). By responding to our Lord’s invitation, Peter experiences the strength to respond, to keep going, to obey—not a strength that arises from himself, but *at your word*, a word that is planted in his heart and that empowers him to act, to row into the deep waters and to cast forth his nets, and there—in his exhausted state—to experience not only a miraculous catch of fish, but to encounter Jesus as the Christ, the living God, who gives rest to his weary soul.

A monastic once told me that we often find ourselves tired and worn out from the day’s demands and responsibilities, ready to collapse in exhaustion, and—at just that moment when we have nothing else left to give—someone will come along needing our assistance. And, to our own surprise, a gentle and humble offering will arise in us—a listening ear or a kind word when we thought we were running on empty. Instead of saying, “No, I don’t have time for you,” we will notice that we are almost effortlessly able to be present to another without even noticing ourselves, our exhaustion, our heaviness. It is at this moment, the monastic told me, that we truly experience God acting in us, that we can do all things through Christ who strengthens us (Phil 4:13), that it is not our will but his will that is being done (Mk 14:36; Lk 22:42), that our deeds are being produced by him (Jn 3:21).

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