

Live the Antidote

[Matthew 11:25–30](#)

Don't you love the so-called "comfortable words", "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."

I often wonder what was in the minds of those who created the lectionary. Why did they choose this particular gospel reading for the celebration of St Francis?

We honor St Francis for his connection with nature and particularly animals. There are many stories about his deep intuitive connection with the wild creatures around him, and it is said that when he could not get people to listen to him preach, he preached to the birds. But it is a mistake to think of him solely as a creation mystic.

As a young man, Francis was probably seen by people around him as a crazy man. He chose to live as a beggar and spend his time rebuilding ruined churches. In his mid-twenties he was inspired by the story of Jesus sending out his disciples on a preaching mission, to live a life of poverty and to preach penance, brotherly love and peace. Within a year 11 other men had joined him and they lived in a deserted leper colony and went out preaching in the surrounding villages. Just like a group of religious hippies.

It was a time of war. The Pope was one of the most powerful men in the world and the church was busy with the Fourth Crusade – sending armies to fight the Moslems for control of the Holy Land. There is a stark contrast between the desire for power and war which was motivating the leaders of the Western world, and the highest echelons of the church, and Francis' hippies preaching love and peace and eating whatever people gave them, or just going hungry.

And here we are, eight hundred years later and who are we commemorating? Not the political machinations and atrocities of war perpetrated by Pope Innocent III and his cohorts but a group of hippies who somehow managed to get papal approval and developed into a resistance movement. A resistance movement preaching simple living and simple loving.

I wonder what people living in the year 2820 will remember about this time in history. Yes, history books will record the pandemic, the great extinction, the fires, the unrest and the machinations of the government. But will those be celebrated? Or will they celebrate the small group of people who started a resistance movement – a group of people who took simple living seriously – a group of people who preached non-violence and lived how they preached? Will our grandchildren and great grandchildren look back and be grateful that we took the call of Jesus seriously and started to live simply with no more than we needed?

The catch phrase "Live simply so that others may simply live" is as true now as when it was coined. And especially for us. If all the people on the earth had the lifestyle that we enjoy we

would need the resources of four planet Earths to sustain us.¹ This calculation of ecological footprint goes beyond the idea of a carbon footprint and looks at all the resources that we use including wood, water, metal and so on. Whether you look just at the amount of carbon and other greenhouse gases we create or attempt to quantify the whole ecological picture, either way it isn't pretty. We are being greedy.

And it is past time for us to change and to heed the call to live simply, not to hoard but just to have and use what we really need.

I know that it's difficult to believe that the little we can each do will really make a difference. It's much easier to say that corporations need to change or the government needs to lead us towards a greener future. Those things are true but to use them as an excuse to continue to over-consume is a copout. Corporations and governments change because of the people who support them, who buy their goods and services. That, ultimately, is us.

We have the power to make a difference, just as Francis and his friends did. They didn't wait for the church to reform, for the Pope to stop making war and suppressing dissidents; they just went ahead and lived the way they thought God wanted them to.

I have often wondered what exactly Jesus was thinking when he said, "my yoke is easy, and my burden is light." It seems to contradict his own experience of betrayal and death and his teachings about taking up your cross. You will remember that the gospel reading for St Benedict's day is about counting the cost of discipleship. I like this one for St Francis day much better. "Count the cost" versus "My yoke is easy" – I know which one wins for me! Maybe we should change the name of the church and become Franciscans!

But I think it's a mistake to separate that attractive phrase, "my yoke is easy, and my burden is light," from the sentence before, "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."

Gentle and humble in heart. Isn't this the core of the spiritual path?

Gentle, humble, working in partnership with Christ, living serenely in harmony with all beings, human and non-human. Creating the reign of God, the peaceable kin-dom here on earth.

That is what I long for.

It is the path of non-violence, the road less taken. It doesn't mean that we have to live in a deserted house as religious hippies. We don't have to give up all our possessions and disengage with society. In fact, the call to service, the call to build God's reign on earth will bring us more and more into connection with the wider society.

But we do it from a place of rest, a place of serenity, a place of calm. There are many things we can do nothing about; death and taxes being only a start – we can do nothing about the pandemic,

¹ <https://www.bbc.com/news/magazine-33133712>

the President being sick, the Supreme Court, the result and the aftermath of the election, the fires. Yet we allow ourselves to be stressed by them. We allow ourselves to be stressed by circumstances over which we have no control. Jesus said, "Can any one of you by worrying add a single hour to your life?" (Matt 6:27) And of course the answer to that is NO. In fact, worrying can shorten your life.

Be gentle and humble in heart. Humility reminds us that everything does not revolve around us. Humility reminds us that while there is much we can and should do, we are not God and a lot of things are in God's hands and not ours. And in that we can rest.

I know it's easier said than done. I fret less about the big things like the pandemic than I do about the phone calls I have failed to answer, the broken commitments, the double-booking, the people I have let down. But the outcome of those failings is also in God's hands. I do my best. Humility reminds me that I will always fall short but that God's love makes all things new and even my worst mistakes and sins are transformed in the love of God. Everything starts and ends in Christ.

When we are resting in Christ and following the path of Jesus then we can rely on the unconditional love of Christ for all beings. We are already living in the new creation and making it manifest. Let us remember Francis and his friends as we cooperate with the Holy Spirit and yoked with Jesus, change our own hearts and our own lives so that we live simply, creating a new way of being in resistance to the dominant culture.

My friends, in these difficult times there is much anxiety, much fear, much hatred. The antidote is those who take Jesus seriously. Together with other people of faith and integrity across the planet let us rest in Christ and stand firmly on the knowledge that he is making all things new. The antidote to the new disasters which strike every day is to follow in the paths of Francis and live simply, gently, humbly upon the planet. The antidote is the new creation in Christ.

In the words of the prophet Micah, "What does the Lord require of you? To act justly, and to love mercy and to walk humbly with your God."

Let us pray

God give us the grace to accept with serenity the things we cannot change, the courage to change the things that should be changed and the wisdom to know the one from the other. Amen