

Homily for July 7, 2002  
14th Sunday in Ordinary Time Cycle A

By Father Charles Bowes

Zechariah 9:9-11  
Romans 8:9, 11-13  
Matthew 11:25-30

## *Our burden we do not bear alone.*

“Take my yoke upon you and learn from me, for I am gentle and humble in heart, and you will find rest for yourselves. For my yoke is easy and my burden light,” says Jesus in Matthew chapter 11.

These are possibly some of the most consoling words of sacred scripture – giving a sense that the God with whom we make contact in Jesus Christ truly cares and companions and journeys with us in and through the heavy loads, the burdens. Sooner or later, most of us awaken to the feeling that the life we are living is not exactly the life we hoped it might be. It’s not that we don’t try. We do, but life often gets ahead of us. It may be a relationship that was once life giving but has grown cold and distant. It may be the expectation that the career or the job that was supposed to give us a sense of purpose and fulfillment has left us instead feeling tired and stuck and overwhelmed. It may come to us when we realize that the parents we depended on for much of our lives have now become dependent on us. It may be that as a student the dream we had of further studies or a career has to take a different or an all together postponed direction. For most people, regardless of the form it takes, there comes a moment

of honesty when we look into the depths of our hearts and realize that this isn’t what we wanted life to be – and we are heavily burdened.

In the Christian life this is called a catechumenal moment, which is always the prelude to another conversion. It begins with the realization that something is missing or that something is here we can’t handle. It ends with the knowledge that our deepest need is an emptiness only God can fill. But we don’t know that only God can fill that emptiness – and so we often substitute fillers – more work, other relationships, things and activities and food and games and religion and prayer – but made in our own image. And while these may be distractions from the weight of the burden, the burden remains, the emptiness lingers, deepens.

This passage of Saint Matthew’s gospel, chapter 11, this image of yoke and burden and the invitation of Jesus to take up his yoke, this image implies two – a yoke of oxen are two oxen pulling the same load. As I prayed about this and reflected I began to realize that the burdens I bear as pastor and personal burdens are really the burdens of the Lord but made real today in the here and now. For together with Saint Paul in Colossians chapter 1, “(we) fill up what is lacking in the sufferings of Christ...” My problem is that I’m carrying my burdens as though they are all mine while in

reality my companion, my yoke mate is none other than Jesus whose humanity I share. Consequently the prayer I've begun to pray out of this image of a shared yoke asks Jesus a question – “Lord how can I feel your presence in the pulling of this burden?” And in the asking of the question, by engaging in the emotion of this struggle here and now very specific, I discover that I am not alone and that the burden that up to now I felt was mine alone has an energy within it to connect me with the Lord and through the Lord to the spirit of the living God whose purpose somehow I am fulfilling.

The burden is real. The pain and the struggle, the sleeplessness – all are real but the bearing of them is something no longer I do alone. My struggle is to try and invite the Lord through a question to be my companion. The burden doesn't go away but I have a sense that I'm not alone in the bearing of it. “Lord, how did you come to know that you weren't alone in the bearing of your burdens? Lord, how did you feel the presence of God in and through your pain?” The silence that ensues upon asking such a simple question enables the burden to be shared and the power of God to be present even in the midst of turmoil and confusion.

Two weeks ago the priests of the Archdiocese of Cincinnati met in Indianapolis to plan for the future in the midst of the declining number of priests. In one of the sessions I happened to sit next to Archbishop Pilarczyk who commented that in recent weeks and

months it has been difficult for him to sleep at night. I said to him I shared the same burden and he observed, “That's what it means to be a pastor.” And my reflection on that comment gave me yet another way to pray, “Lord, did you endure sleepless nights of worry?” And my burden of sleeplessness became a burden shared rather than my own to bear alone.

**Our burden we do not bear alone.**