

An Address by Howard Friend for Sunday 5th July 2020

In the name of the Father, Son and Holy Spirit, Amen

Come unto me all you who are weary and heavy laden and I will give you rest – for my Yoke is easy and my Burden is Light.

I wonder what you make of that?

For many of us these words of Jesus are a great source of comfort, perhaps they have been particularly so for you during Lockdown.

For others, they just confirm the suspicion that – as Karl Marx said - Religion is the Opium of the People – or to put it another way God is only a crutch to keep you going when you're crocked – God is for losers. Whatever your view – stay tuned – as they say – because I'm going to concentrate on these few verses this morning and – first take a look back to the circumstances during which they were spoken. What did it mean to Jesus's listeners - and then have a look at what these words mean to us.

What's their significance for our post Lockdown, post Truth, post whatever world.

I have to confess I couldn't resist the idea that Jesus might say today not - My Yoke is easy - but - my Woke is easy.

Now if you've no idea what I'm talking about you'll - be patient – all will be revealed. If you have heard of Woke and are wondering just where I'm going with it then I guess - you can cut to the chase and just fast forward. 'O Brave New World – that has such facility in it! '

Won't be able to do that when we go back to rock hard pews!

To the Gospel then - Remember - these words of Matthew were directed at first Century Jewish type Christians. Now – the bit we had read to us in our Gospel reading is easier to understand if we get the nub of Jesus's argument that they – his Jewish audience - were trying to reach God by an excessively complicated rules based system whereas Jesus is offering essentially a relationship built on love.

I think it's fair to say that if they didn't get it then - quite a few of us still don't get it today. You can't get to know God by tick boxing a set of rules. Jesus's listeners were doing this to the nth degree. I'll give you just one example. Keep the Sabbath Day Holy, no 5 of the so called 10 Commandments. Don't work on that day, take a break. Over the many years since Moses had given the written law (Torah and 10 Commandments) , Jewish leaders had added thousands of supplementary clauses, the so-called oral law. And here's the important bit – those leaders gave equal weight to the written and oral law. So with the Sabbath Day law for instance - the sub clause said if you walked more than $\frac{3}{4}$ mile on the Sabbath you had worked, therefore broken the law.

That's the Burden, that's the heavy stuff Jesus was promising to relieve his followers of. Too many subclauses. Too much detail, as a result of which Jesus said - you've lost the plot. Do you know – he said to them, and he says to us today - there's only 2 commandments really: Love God with all your heart and your neighbour as yourself. My yoke is easy and my burden is light.

It was revolutionary to his hearers then, and it's no less so today.

If you love God, and perhaps more importantly, allow him to love you. If you know you are a person of worth and treat others as God has treated you, you won't lie, kill, steal, pinch someone's partner, abuse people or destroy the natural world.

I found the 10 Commandments last week and - the ones on Dartmoor – on Buckland Beacon. They were carved on two slabs of granite there in the 1920's as some of you may know. I went walking (as part of my getting over Lockdown therapy) and came across a woman hiker having her picnic there.

If you've not been – let me tell you there are two slabs of granite - about 5' by 3' with their inscription – that lie slightly crookedly on the South Side of the Tor. In between is a grass gully, and she was very comfortably nestled there, out of the wind, eating her sandwiches . It made me laugh – and I said to her – That's the way to deal with the 10 Commandments get right in there, make yourself comfortable and enjoy the view, she chuckled too.

You see even today many of us view the 10 Commandments as a whole load of 'Thou Shalt Nots' placed imposingly high in austere churches, by certain Puritan types – instead of considering the essence, the 2 positives 'Thou Shalts' of Jesus – Love God and love your neighbour.

Like the hiker we need to get down and be at ease between those commandments. That's where we belong that's where we are most effective.

Come unto me all you who are weary and heavy laden and I will give you rest.

For my yoke is easy and my burden is light.

There's a paradox and caveat here though isn't there? - because the way of love is often very difficult and demanding. To follow Christ is no walk in the park, something Karl Marx misunderstood completely.

And here's where I want to introduce the word Woke, slightly mischievously perhaps, but to make an important point.

What is Woke then – in short it's a modern idea, a descriptive term for a generation of people - similar to the idea behind Baby Boomers or Millenials. In the same way it started out as solely descriptive but morphed into being ridiculed by some. It was born out of Black consciousness. If you are Woke you're alert (awake / woke) to

racial injustice. It has since come to encompass being alert to all sorts of social injustice as well.

In that sense you could argue very convincingly that Jesus is Woke.

Is his Woke easy – no not really. The commandment to love our neighbour as ourselves is incredibly hard. But it's the rule of love, not the legalistic nit-picking, tick-boxing law. Jesus's rule of love supercedes that.

Those of us who want to know God have the privilege and great joy of following Christ down that road of love.

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Am I Woke? Are you Woke. Discuss - and I'll see you at Zoom coffee later.