

Our readings today contain a large number of contrasts and conflicts and that is what I want to look at today, the conflicts we can find ourselves in as we live our lives as Christians.

Let's start with our reading from Romans. Assuming you can get your head around all the do, do not, want and want not, you can hear Paul's frustration with his own actions coming through right from the beginning. "I do not understand what I do. For what I want to do I do not do, but what I hate I do." (15) I have to assume that I am not alone in finding that I can associate with this feeling. I know that there are things I shouldn't do but I find that I end up doing them. I also know that there are things I should be doing that I end up failing to do.

This passage I think should give us encouragement if nothing else. We tend to have a view of the disciples and early church as "almost perfect", the models of what we should be. They had lived with Jesus and knew what they were doing. Paul was an evangelist without equal, preaching in difficult positions at the drop of a hat, surviving affliction without letting it get him down and living what he preached. The ideal example of an evangelist or missionary. And yet here we see that he struggled. He wasn't perfect, always doing what was right. He didn't glide through life. Like us he had problems.

I'd also like to point out that it wasn't just that he had to struggle but then succeeded. Paul failed. By the sound of it, Paul failed repeatedly. This is Saint Paul, probably one of the most important figures from the New Testament after Jesus, that spread the Gospel throughout Asia Minor. He wrote about ¼ of what is included in the New Testament. He spoke with kings and rulers. He failed to live a perfect Godly life.

This should mean that while we try not to, we shouldn't feel too bad when we too fail. It is an unfortunate part of life that we are not perfect. It's one of the reasons why we have a confession every week. However, as Paul says earlier in Romans, in our reading from 2 weeks ago, we should not aim to continue to sin so that forgiveness can be shown. Although we have to accept that we will sin, we should endeavour to do our best not to.

Paul finishes this section with the thought that despite all this, God has done something about this and it is through Jesus Christ our Lord that God provides a way out of the despair that Paul has found himself in.

If we now move on to our gospel reading, we see some more conflict. The first section is about how the way message is presented does not necessarily change the response.

Jesus and John the Baptist both came declaring pretty much the same message, that the Kingdom of God had come, that people needed to repent and be forgiven. However their approach could hardly have been more different. John based himself in one place in the wilderness, far from any centres of population. He wore the most basic of clothing and ate a very limited diet. People that didn't want to hear and respond to his message found a reason why they could ignore what he was saying by claiming that "He has a demon in him", he didn't live a normal life so he couldn't be taken seriously.

Jesus carried out his ministry by travelling through the countryside, preaching in the towns and villages. He attended weddings, had meals with people (even if they weren't the most acceptable people). We have to assume that he would have dressed in normal clothing. Again his detractors found a reason to ignore him, "He is a glutton and wine drinker, a friend of tax collectors and other outcasts!" (19). He associated with the wrong sort of people therefore he couldn't be taken seriously.

Their approach was poles apart, but they both received much the same responses.

Some accepted what they were saying. We know this must have been the case for John since the chapter opens with John sending some of his disciples to Jesus to confirm that Jesus was the one John had been foretelling. Jesus also obviously had some that accepted his teaching since that is what the whole of the New Testament is about and why we are here now having done exactly that.

Others refused to accept what was being taught, no matter what the approach was. They looked at the people and came up with a reason why they could be ignored. The fact that they looked at 2 opposite approaches and managed to find a reason to ignore the message from both of them is just proof that these were excuses rather than fact.

Don't we see exactly the same thing today? The Church is a bunch of hypocrites. It's all hype. How can you believe in a God that allows suffering? The Church is out of touch with current reality. The Church is just jumping on the current bandwagon.

Many people do not want to hear the message that they are sinners and require forgiveness. In our world, the idea that there is a universal morality, a right and wrong that covers everyone is not a well accepted idea. People prefer the idea of "If it isn't hurting other people, what's the problem?" or "If it's right for me that's good enough". When we, as a Church and as individuals, tell them that there is more to life and that they need God's forgiveness available through Jesus' death, it often requires that they change their entire world-view. Many will not want to do that and so they come up with reasons why they can ignore what we are saying. It happened to Jesus and it will happen to us, but our passage does not end there and I'd like to spend a few minutes now looking at the last few verses of our gospel reading.

"Come to me, all of you who are tired from carrying heavy loads, and I will give you rest. Take my yoke and put it on you, and learn from me, because I am gentle and humble in spirit; and you will find rest. For the yoke I will give you is easy, and the load I will put on you is light." (28-30)

Jesus recognises that living life, particularly life as a Christian can be hard work. Life has a way of catching up with us, lock-down, family or personal illness, loss, work. It all builds up and can leave us feeling like we are carrying the world on our shoulders, like we have no idea how we will manage to get through. Jesus here encourages us that he understands and he has a way forward.

While writing this sermon I was reading a commentary (Barclay: *The gospel of Matthew Volume 2*, p20) and it suggested that the Greek word translated here as *easy* could be translated *well-fitting* so we could have “the yoke I will give you is well-fitting”. Apparently an ox yoke at that time was custom made to the ox so that it would fit well and not rub or chafe the ox while it was in use. Jesus, as a carpenter would have well understood this process and had presumably made quite a few yokes in his time.

There are 2 points I see here that I'd like to share.

The first is that Jesus does not say he will relieve us of all work. A yoke is a device used by an ox when it is working, pulling or carrying loads. From what I've seen, total relief from work is not something we as humans cope with very well. The number of people I've seen that retire from paid employment, only to get involved with any number of other activities to “fill the time”.

The second point is that Jesus promises us a well-fitting yoke, one custom made to fit us, and a light load. William Barclay puts it this way. “Jesus says 'My yoke fits well.' What he means is: 'The life I give you is not a burden to cause you pain; your task is made to measure to fit you.' Whatever God sends us is made to fit our needs and our abilities exactly.” (Barclay: *The gospel of Matthew Volume 2*, p20)

Jesus knows us and our abilities and will fit what he asks us to do with what we are able to do. It also means, going back to our first reading, that he knows what we struggle with. He knows our weaknesses and will include that knowledge when fitting our yoke and assigning us tasks.

I don't think that there is a better way to end this sermon after all that than Paul's declaration. “Thanks be to God, who delivers me through Jesus Christ our Lord!”. Amen.