



Sermon: - 25th June 2017

He ain't heavy, he's my brother

Genesis 24:34-38, 42-49, 58-67, Matthew 11:16-19, 25-30

There is a book which was recently released in the United States. It claimed the best-seller list rapidly before going global. Initially publishers thought it was too dangerous to print. What was it? An expose of the inside secrets of the CIA? A do-it-yourself guide to bomb-making? Brain Surgery for Dummies? No! It was eventually taken on by a publisher after it was snapped up by parents through "print on demand" on the internet. It's called "Fifty Dangerous Things (You Should Let Your Children Do)". It's billed as an activity book about danger, safety, and the incredible world around us. In a society where children are too often coddled, 50 Dangerous Things (You Should Let Your Children Do) reminds us that climbing trees is good for the soul, and that a pocket knife is not a weapon. It's full of exciting ways children can explore the world around them. With easy-to-follow instructions, it tells children about activities such as walking a tightrope; skills, like throwing a spear; experiences, like sleeping in the wild. Taking a risk now and then is part of how we learn and how we gain experience. Risk is part of life as this book aims to show.

On the other hand, we've all heard about the daft excuses people come up with to prevent activities which might potentially be harmful but are actually just part of the normal risks of living. Under the guise of Health and Safety regulations, conkers and yo-yos are banned from playgrounds. Graduating students at Anglia Ruskin University in Cambridge were told not to pose for pictures throwing their hats in the air in case someone was injured by the falling headgear. When the breakfast show presenter Chris Moyles arrived in the studio with a birthday cake for his co-host, he was told candles were banned due to fire risk, and he'd have to cut the cake with a plastic knife so he didn't hurt himself.

As society has become more and more risk averse, so the number of rules and regulations meant to avoid risk become greater and greater and planning any activity more and more complicated. No wonder our children end up sitting at home in front of their computers.

But what has all this got to do with 1st century Palestine?

Jesus was speaking to a group of people who had been trying to carry an impossible load, the load of the Jewish law and all the requirements imposed upon them by the religious leaders of the day. These leaders had tried to make the law easier to follow by creating

regulations for every situation. "What does it mean to keep the Sabbath day holy? It means you don't work on the Sabbath – you rest. Well, what constitutes work?" and so follows a whole lot of rules and regulations which are designed to make it easier for people to understand what they can and can't do, but actually end up making the whole thing so burdensome that it is impossible to keep all the regulations. The rules were, in a sense, trying to eradicate risk – the risk of inadvertently breaking the law. However, in something of the same way that our health and safety consciousness can get out of hand, rather than keeping people safe from breaking the law, the regulations became an impracticable burden. People were hemmed in and constrained by the requirements of the law, instead of released to live productive and healthy lives, which was the initial intention.

The cleanliness laws, for example, were important. Because of all the ritual washing the Israelites were more healthy than neighbouring nations and free from illness in a way that was unusual at that time in history, but they had been ritualised and extended till they became an onerous ceremony rather than a sensible precaution. In the New Testament, the word "labour" implies working to the point of utter exhaustion. The term "heavy laden" indicated that someone was bearing a load that had been dumped on them in the past and that they had never managed to free themselves from. The image is of someone bowed down under a great weight. Together, these descriptions describe a person who is exhausted from trying to carry the burden that they had been given and were carrying for years. Jesus' listeners were exhausted from trying to measure up to the expectations of the law.

This is the context into which Jesus is speaking. 'Come to me, all you that are weary and are carrying heavy burdens, and I will give you rest.

But why then, does he begin to speak of a yoke? That sounds like just another burden! But perhaps not. I'm sure that you are all aware that the "yoke" is part of the harness used to pull a cart or a plough. It is used to keep the oxen under control and guide them so that they work properly. The yoke is designed for two animals. It is used to bring the strength of two animals together in order to pull a load that is impossible for one animal to pull on its own. So, what Jesus is saying here is, come to me, and I will bear the burden with you. You can't do it on your own. When you walk with me, yoked together with me, I will share the load. So far so good, but it's still a burden.

The yoke metaphor also shows us that Jesus bears the greater burden. The two animals yoked together were often different. One of the animals would be more experienced than

the other so the younger animal was learning from the older one. The experienced animal knew the work, knew its master and knew how to obey the master's commands. It was able to give direction, help, and effectively train the inexperienced member of the team. By comparing himself to the yoked animal, Jesus was contrasting himself with the religious leaders of His day. He was suggesting that the way to God was through him, through walking with him, in a team with him, following him and obeying him, rather than all the rules and regulations imposed by the religious leaders.

And here I think is the nub of the thing. Jesus was really saying to his listeners; it's not all about following all these rules and regulations. And if we consider this passage in the light of other passages in the New Testament, Jesus was saying, it's all about grace. My yoke is easy because I am not demanding that you follow all these petty restrictions. My yoke is easy because I am helping you to live the life of faith, to live God's way. My yoke is easy because all I ask of you is to love God and to love your neighbour, no more and no less.

The yoke that Jesus places on us is to keep the two commandments which actually sum up the law. And the more we love God, and walk with Jesus, the more we will love our neighbour.

We know how hard it is to do both these things. And as the apostle Paul reminds us, we often can't do the good we want to do. But here comes the twist – when we do fall and fail, Jesus offers us forgiveness. He is there, yoked to us, to lift us to our feet again and to share the load, the burden of trying to obey the only law, the law of love. Or rather, Jesus leads us into a new world where there is no law to follow, no prescribed course of action, no rules and regulations. Rather, what he commands in us is the passion of love, love of God and love of neighbour.

This in a way is a burden because it makes demands on us. It demands all of us, heart, soul, mind and strength. It sounds impossible but the more we love God, the more we will find that we love our neighbour. In loving God, we will find that love of neighbour springs as naturally from us as water from the earth. In loving God, we will naturally begin to do what is right. Yoked to Jesus and following him, guided by him we will learn from him as the young oxen learns from the older one, and we will begin, more and more often, to get it right, without the benefit of rules and regulations to tell us what to do.

When we turn to Christ, become yoked to him, we live by the Spirit, not by the Law; and as we grow into Christ we find that we no longer want to do things that the Law prohibits. So, we no longer need the Law because we no longer want to do all the things that the law forbids, since we live by the Spirit in Christ. Yoked to Jesus we have his power to help us live right lives. The yoke that Jesus gives us is tailored to us. It is designed to fit us. And because it fits, it is not a burden. Sometimes things that we think are going to be a burden aren't because we enjoy them, or because the outcome really matters to us. As the song says, "He ain't heavy, he's my brother". The relationship is the important thing. Isaac worked for 7 years to gain Rebecca's hand in marriage, only to find that he been married to Leah. He might have given up at this point, 7 years is a long time, however, he loved Rebecca so much that he was prepared to work another 7 years in order to be allowed to marry her. His love for Rebecca made all worthwhile. In the context of the relationship it was not a burden. In the same way, yoked to Jesus, it's is this yoke of love which leads us into loving action and right ways. Which guides and helps us, which keeps us in right paths. As Paul said, "Wretched man that I am! Who will rescue me from this body of death? Thanks be to God through Jesus Christ our Lord!" Because through him, yoked to him, we are set free and his yoke is easy and his burden is light.