

Surrender to the yolk

St Philip's Anglican Church, O'Connor

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Genesis 24.34-38, 42-49, 58-67, Psalm 45.10-17, Romans 7.14-25, Matthew 11.15-30.

Down at the boardwalk at Bateman's Bay I sometimes sit and watch the seabirds, mostly pelicans and seagulls. The seagulls spend most of their time squabbling and fighting over scrapes of food. Their existence seems one long struggle. David, who is wildlife biologist, just shrugs and says, and please excuse the language, 'Yeah, nature's a bitch'. David has of course seen nature close up this way much more than I have, from seal colonies down south to bustard colonies in the north. The word that could characterise them all is 'struggle'. But struggle is not limited to animals. Struggle seems an inherent part of human life as well. I want to look at just three types of human struggle that we find in today's readings and then give you the answer, the solution to them all.

The first struggle is the struggle of family, that is, the difficulties of living with the people we are bound to by blood or upbringing. I am sure we all know what this feels like. There is a whole industry called counselling, psychotherapy and self—help books based around dealing with the consequences of our upbringing or living with our families. These are all helpful things yet the problems they address are not modern phenomenon. They are as ancient as the days. In today's Old Testament reading we hear more of the story of Isaac, the son of Abraham. Here is a person that had more than his fair share of struggle. The first time we encounter Isaac he is about to be sacrificed by his father, that is murdered by his parent in a religious ritual, apparently ordered by the God of the universe. The fact that it didn't happen would hardly make it any better for Isaac. The fact that God stopped the event from reaching its' horrible and bloody climax would have been cold comfort. Something like this has simply got to affect you for the rest of your life and poison your relationship with your parents. In fact it is sobering analogy of religious abuse.

Isaac also has a half—brother Ishmael who is banished with his mother Hagar. Isaac then has the weight of being the favoured son with all those expectations along with the fracturing of his relationship with his brother. Our relationships with our siblings are some of most important in our lives and when they are damaged it causes immense grief. Yet such pain does not obliterate the bonds we have with our parents and family.

We next hear of Isaac when it comes time for him to be married. Mind you he is quite old by this time, 40, and he is grieving for his mother, Sarah who has died. He marries Rebekah, a relative who is an attractive young woman, but his family struggles do not end with this promising new beginning. He is so possessive and jealous about Rebekah he lies about her identity to a neighbouring King and gets into all types of trouble. He goes on to have twins with Rebekah. She connives and schemes to have her favourite Jacob preferred over Esau, the twin who is born first. This meant that Jacob and Esau fought and argued and did not trust each other. Esau marries two Hittite women, which as the scripture tells it, made life bitter for Isaac and Rebekah. On Isaacs death bed Rebekah finally gets what she has planned and Isaac is tricked into disinheriting his first—born. Finally Isaac dies—an old man wounded, bitter, duped and grieved. Wow, the struggle of family. In a way the story of Isaac is a metaphor for our struggle with our families. His story encapsulates the damage, pain, bitterness and grief we too can experience.

The struggles we have with family are not the least of our problems. There are the difficulties we experience in being part of society at large. For that we can look at the Gospel reading, that series of woes that Jesus declares against Chorazin, Bethsaida and Capernaum, all of which were towns in Galilee. Jesus grew up in Galilee and it was a region with several major high ways of the empire. Agriculture, fisheries and commerce/trade were part of its economy. In the time of Christ Capernaum was an orthodox Jewish stronghold that rigorously excluded non—Jews from their settlement. Jesus had very little success in getting his message across in Galilee and neither did the first Christian evangelists. For example Galilee and its towns are not mentioned anywhere in the Acts of the Apostles. Apparently it took about 500 years before the Christian faith was firmly established in this region, which is remarkable when you think that it was the land of Christ's upbringing.

This region then is commercially important, insular, had a strong insider—outsider mentality and was apparently completely unresponsive to Jesus message. What is interesting is that in this Gospel passage the community as a whole is judged and condemned. It is a fact that the leadership of communities shape the ethos and values that underpin life together and it is communities and families that shape individuals. And it is a fact that there is tension and struggle as we live in communities together.

Societies and communities throughout the ages have dealt with this tension in the same way Galilee did—by defining who is in and out very clearly and rejecting those who do not fit the standard. We do this in Australia as much as Galilee did 2000 years ago. At the heart of this is suspicion, violence, judgmentalism, oppression and scapegoating. It can be an uphill battle trying to follow the way of Christ in this reality. As one biblical commentator I read put it, “Capernaums abound in the modern Christian West. Miracles of love are performed daily in Christ's name by a tiny minority, but their revelatory significance is missed”. People just do not see the connections.

But perhaps the struggle of family and society pale into insignificance against what I think is the greatest struggle, the internal struggle. For this I don't think there is a better description than our passage from Romans. Paul describes the inner state, the state where our will and intentions, that is what we truly want, is at war with our negative patterns of thought and behaviour, what we do not want. Paul cries out,

“I do not understand my own actions. For I do not do what I want, but I do the very thing I hate.” This one verse could be applied to so many circumstances in our life. When we want to show love and compassion to someone in our family but all we can think about and feel is how they have hurt and abandoned us. When we want to confront the injustice we see in the society around us but we are instead driven by our need to feel safe and accepted. When we want to exercise and eat well but instead we succumb to our favourite addictions. Paul puts it bluntly when he says, “I can will what is right, but I cannot do it.” And then that deep anguished cry, “Wretched man that I am! Who will rescue me from this body of death?” It is a deep cry and admission of powerlessness in face of painful internal struggle.

For those that follow Jesus Christ there is one answer, and only one answer, to these struggles, the difficulties we experience with family, society and ourselves, and any other struggle. It is this: “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.” The spiritual journey, indeed the human journey, is about getting us to this place—this place of surrender to Jesus Christ and his Lordship in our lives. And it seems to be some sort of inexplicable spiritual truth that we actually need the struggle, the difficulties, to put us in a position where we are finally open to the possibility of help from God.

And paradoxically the way to deal with the struggle is to give up, it is to turn to Christ and follow him. When we surrender and come to Christ, willing to take his yoke, then struggle ceases. The problems may not go away—in fact it very likely will not—but how we look at them and cope with them will change.

A yoke is a great image for our relationship with Christ and how this whole thing works. It presents a picture where we are united with him. His power, strength and wisdom becomes available to us. He helps us pull our load and carry our burdens. When we are weak it does not matter because he is pulling for us. When we are strong his greater strength keeps us in check. The struggles cease when we take on his yoke because the direction, the answers, the path are laid out by him. We follow, trusting in his faithfulness and love. When the struggle ceases then we are able to think clearly, act consciously, and live in the freedom of Christ. And this freedom of Christ always encapsulates forgiveness, mercy, compassion, justice and above all love.

However if you surrender but still try and steer the plow then the struggle will continue. I actually think this is what most of us do because to truly let go is both counter—intuitive and frightening. We also like to be in control and to feel powerful. If you have been taught like me that you must be independent, relying on no one, then handing it all over to the Lord can seem next to impossible. Our egos do not surrender easily. For me it is like that narrow gate Jesus describes that is so hard to squeeze through. Yet despite how difficult it is the only answer is to surrender—day-by-day, moment-by-moment—if that is what it takes. Go to Jesus Christ, make him the Lord of your life, take his yoke. Peace, the peace that passes all understanding will be yours. But your surrender must be real. It must be as total as you can honestly make it and when you find you are pulling away from Christ then you must surrender again, and again, and again.

Praying and meditating, coming to communion, hearing the stories of the faith, sharing with our Christian brothers and sisters all help us in this journey. Jesus says, “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.”