

The Congregation of Saint Athanasius  
A sermon preached by Father Bradford on The Fourth Sunday after Trinity  
July 9, 2017

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People hear what they want to hear. And no exception is made for the Gospel Good News. Our Lord Jesus says, “Take My yoke upon you and learn from Me, for My yoke is easy and My burden light.” Last Sunday I mentioned people zero in on words like *easy* and *light*. We hear them all the time. Ad agencies get a lot of use out of hot button words. *Easy* and *light* mean: easy assembly and easy payment plan, lightweight handling and light on calories! We even reduce the gracious invitation of Blessed Jesus to sound bites and always in our favor. We sentimentalize and/or self-center the words of God Incarnate.

Our Lord Jesus does indeed use words like *easy* and *light*. But He also uses them in connection with *other* words we ignore: words like *take*, *learn*, *yoke*, and *burden*. The slick advertisers focus the sales pitch on the benefits and leave the unpleasant details to the fine print. But the Son of God does not do this. He never lures us into believing. Up front we are told there is indeed a yoke, a burden, and that we have things to learn. In the Christian religion there are efforts to be made and things to endure.

Oxen yoked for work in a field was a common sight in 1<sup>st</sup> Century Palestine. It was once a common sight in colonial Boston as well. Jesus used the image in his teaching. The yoke has a purpose: the exertion of drawing a load or plowing a field. For us that means our strength and cooperation with the inner prompting of the Holy Ghost. You and I do not automatically do the will of God. We must put forth to do so. We must do so repeatedly. We assist and Mass, we say our prayers, we cultivate the virtues, we make periodic self-examination and go to confession, we have spiritual reading material, and attend quiet days of reflection, and go on retreat. These are all parts of the yoke.

As long as we live our self-centered and selfish side continues to need to be subjected and brought under control. The yoke seems a restraint that chafes against the neck of our pride and will. Out at Hancock Shaker Village in the Berkshires the handler puts a cloth on the shoulders of his team of oxen and finds the right fitting yoke that does not chafe. When we wear the yoke of Christ, Christian character is formed and framed. Sin is shaken off because the practice of the Christian discipline involves the acquisition of grace. We first arrive at a point where we no

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longer think of the yoke at all. Then one day, hearing again Jesus' words that the yoke is easy, it occurs to us that we have experienced the truth of what He says. The divine service we offer Our Lord is heavy if we do not respond wholeheartedly to it. But it is light and easy if we cooperate with the Holy Ghost in sincerity and truth. As the Prayer Book puts it, "His service is perfect freedom."

Shaking off sin takes effort, involving the work of a lifetime. Jesus does not just talk about the exertion involved but also about the *burden*. The yoke is something carried and endured. Something is put on us. And the effort undertaken under the restraint of the yoke leads to understanding. But the burden is different. The burden is what is suffered as a result of taking up the yoke. And no human being is exempt from the burden. Non-Christians have not taken up Christ's yoke but they also have the burden of life we all carry. The joys can make the burden bearable and there is the expectation there will be joys ahead. But unless we die young we will rather grow old and infirm, usually slowly, with the aches and pains of accumulated years. The Christian has to bear all these burdens as a Christian. That is to say, he bears the common lot of humanity *but with a difference*. He regards trouble and bother as *trial*, because he sees the Divine Hand of the Lord in it. It is an ever-loving Hand of One Who is ever-desiring to perfect our souls. *Trials end*. And the judge who will pronounce the verdict is also our merciful Saviour. The One Who says "My burden is light" is the very One Who also declared "I have come that ye may have light and have it more abundantly."

Everyone is under some yoke. It is either the yoke of God or the yoke of sin. Christ or self, good or evil. Remember the advertising sales pitch. We are invited to compare goods and services. When Christ says His yoke is easy and His burden light, part of the message is left unsaid. Sin gives any alternative yoke its hardness and heaviness. As the self-centered heathenness of our hearts yield to the rule of Christ (and in proportion as that happens) the hardness and heaviness lessen. Christ has said so. And when two wills become the one will of our gracious God, then, at the last, if not at the first, Christian discipleship becomes easy and light.