

The Congregation of Saint Athanasius
A sermon preached by Father Bradford on The Fourth Sunday after Trinity
July 5, 2020

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Our Lord Jesus never puts the hard work of discipleship into fine print in order to trap us into following Him. Right up front He talks about a yoke. His 1st Century Palestinian hearers would have the familiar sight of a team of oxen being harnessed in such a way they were not free to move about independently. And they were yoked to exert themselves over a period of the long work day, and at the task provided for them by their handler.

The yoke of oxen was an immediate analogy for the Christian life, in which our physical and intellectual strength is placed under the command of drawing the work which is the will of God. The effort of oxen plowing a field represents the witness and impact of the disciplined Christian life in the world. And the restraint of the yoke upon the neck calls to mind the effort to shake off unbridled sin, and the forming of Christian character through the acquisition of grace.

Christ tells us the yoke is a burden we must endure. We all bear the burden of life anyway. Christians are not exempt from the common troubles affecting everyone. Just now, *Covid-19* and the resulting rampant unemployment does not spare Christ's disciples. The Christian bears the burden attempting to see in his troubles the divine hand of our merciful and loving Saviour. And bearing the yoke of Christ also brings us troubles that are especially *Christian* troubles: the derision and misunderstanding of those who hate the Catholic Church. Because we bear *Christ's* yoke, there is the supernatural element: the warfare with sin, with all the struggles between nature and grace, doubts about self and about truth, and anxiety about our future and eternity.

Then Christ tells us that the burden of His yoke is *light*. Whenever is a yoke light? That is something new! It makes us look up and take notice. Everyone is under some kind of yoke. It is the yoke of God or the yoke of sin; the yoke of Christ or the yoke of self. Which is lighter? The whole weight of Holy Scripture attests sin, original, actual, lingering, and festering sin, makes for the hardness and heaviness of life.

For the Christian, life is lived from a different center. All that comes to us is taken to be Christ's to give or take as He sees fit. Although we have the capacity to enjoy

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some of those things and bewail others, all is turned over to the Master. Under His yoke, Jesus is all that matters: to love Him and obey Him. And when we do this, we find the load lighter. We discover that in fact we are being carried by Him.

It is impressive to watch two lumbering oxen, each weighing 2000 pounds, slowly move side by side and wait patiently for the handler to place a pad and the right fitting yoke across their shoulders. *Patience is key*. The handler would be no match for 2000 pounds of attitude! While the animals wait, the handler attaches various straps, carefully wipes some spray near their eyes to keep away the flies, and when all is ready, gently whistles and they move forward. The handler's song has various pitches which tell the oxen to move left or right. There is even a tune for reverse! Because the handler has fitted the right yoke, their necks do not chafe. And the day's work is done.

In *The First Epistle of Saint John* we are told the indwelling Holy Spirit makes God's commandments not grievous, and that the Christian heart is drawn up to heavenly things. The victory over our self-centered heathenism gives glory to God, and *The Catechism* assures us in this right relationship to Almighty God we will flourish.

It is when we are under Christ's yoke, no longer trying to impress God and men, that we can be impressed by God and less by men, and take on the shape and meaning He has offered in His blessed Son Jesus Christ.