

HOMILY – 14th Sunday of Year A – July 5th 2020

This homily **begins** with an **invitation** to take a look at the **wall** of relics in the Divine Mercy Chapel. There are almost **30 relics** of saints **secured** onto the north **wall** that can be taken off for **display** in the church on the feast day of the particular saint. [For example, Monday, July 6th is the Feast of Maria Goretti.]

One of the relics (which is a bit of a **stretch**) is a **tiny piece** (a **splinter**) of the “True Cross.” Some people have **speculated** through the years that since Jesus was a **carpenter**, he and Saint Joseph might have made the wooden **crosses** that were **used** in crucifixions in their **carpentry** shop. I **don’t** believe that because their **shop** was in Nazareth – **far** away from where crucifixions took place in Jerusalem, **plus** the Romans no doubt **used** the **same** crosses over and over again.

But certainly, Joseph and Jesus, as carpenters, would have made **furniture, and** what we hear of in today’s Gospel – **yokes**. Jesus says to us: “Take my **yoke** upon you, for my yoke is **easy**, and my burden is light.”

The Jews in His audience were familiar with the talk about **wearing** a ‘yoke.’ A yoke, by **definition** is a wooden crosspiece (or **harness**) that’s fastened over the **necks** of two animals and attached to a **plow** or cart – that the animals would pull **together** in order to plow a field or two horses (that) could pull a chariot or stagecoach.

In the Jewish faith, **commitment** to following God’s instruction and **seeking** to **live** one’s life **under** God’s wisdom was referred to as **wearing** a ‘yoke!’”

The **opponents** of Jesus, the Pharisees, (“the wise and clever”) had made **wearing** that yoke a **heavy**, demanding, draining burden for their followers to **carry**. So, Jesus’ first audience **knew** what it meant to **wear** a “yoke.”

As a carpenter before He began His public ministry, Jesus would have been **asked** to **carve a yoke** for oxen. When **customers** brought in a **team of oxen** to Him, Jesus would spend a good deal of time **measuring** the beasts (the animals) carefully - their height, their width, the gap between the two animals, the heights of their shoulders - all those precise measurements.

He would then go to work, and maybe a week later, the **customer** would bring the oxen back for the **fitting**. He would then gently **place** the yoke over their **shoulders**, **watch** for rough places, and carefully **smooth** the yoke until it “**fit**” perfectly. For the oxen (the bull, the steer, and the animal), the **yoke** was then “easy.”

Easy **isn’t** really the best translation. It **didn’t** mean effortless or simplistic or a cinch. (Far from it!) But the **word** really means that the yoke was **fitted**, (it was **tailored**) to a particular and **unique creature** of God.

And that’s the kind of **yoke** Jesus offers **us** - one that **fits**! That’s the analogy that’s meaningful to him as a carpenter. He wasn’t a fisherman or a farmer – even though he used fishing and agricultural images. But he knew about yokes firsthand.

When we “*come to Him*,” as he says today, the **yoke** that we’re **carrying**, the life struggles that we’re dealing with still **remain**, but in Him, it doesn’t **feel** like an impossible burden but, something that’s **manageable**, in spite of the **problem** that has to be borne.

‘Come! **Take** my yoke upon you. You’ll **find** that it **fits** you just right!’ It’s **not** going to be effortless (or painless or uncomplicated) – but it **won’t** crush you.

In **contrast** to the yoke of the **Pharisees**, the yoke of Jesus is **light** (lighter – easier – more manageable – doable) – but **still there** (still something big or maybe bad to deal with).

Page 2 - 14th Sunday of Year A – July 5th 2020

So, it's a **yoke** that promises strength, but it **doesn't** promise a carefree, relaxed, lighthearted life. Nevertheless, as Jesus says, we are actually "yoked," conjoined, linked to His own yoke – which is easy and lighter with Him!

I'd like to offer a **personal example**. For years, I **dreaded** the day of mother's death. She was the love of my life. Every time I **left** her, I **thought** it might be the **last** time – especially over the past decade – when she suffered from cancer and dementia. I had a great deal of "anticipatory grief."

Almost every time I was with her, I would **hold and kiss** her hand and I would **pray** to myself – "Jesus – thank you – for **keeping** her with me all these years." But I would also think to myself **someday** I'm going hold this hand in the **casket** and it will be ice-cold. And there was a dread and fear about falling apart without her.

When she died two months ago, I was shocked that through God's grace (and coming to Jesus in grief) I was able to handle her death so much better than I had greatly feared! When I touched her hand in the casket, it wasn't warm – but it wasn't ice-cold.

For all those years, sadly, I **doubted** and **didn't trust** that Jesus would be there for me even as I preached to others – that He lightens our burdens and comes to us in all our troubles.

Yoked to Him, the burdens are **still** there (maybe always there) but **He** gets us through it day by day. That's the simple yet profound message of today's Gospel.

What application can you make from this comforting Gospel passage? I think a big fear so many people have these days is – what **happens if things get worse** in our country: the Coronavirus; the economic effects; political unrest; the instability of family life?

What happens if **any** or if all of this gets worse? What are we to do? Panic? Retreat? Maybe the best thing to do is contemplate, to think about **all** our ancestors in history who have **heard** these exact same comforting words of Jesus through the centuries – "Come to Me, all you who labor and are **burdened** with fear, and I will refresh you." Think about all our ancestors in America, in our family who, because of that invitation (to have a "come to Jesus" moment) **and survived plagues**, pandemics, wars, social unrest and tons of other problems.

With God – with Jesus – I can handle the uncertainty and loss; we can survive the **pressures**; we can deal with the **anxieties**.

The yoke, **some** burdens, will **always** be there, but **IN** Jesus, **through** Him and **with** Him – we'll get through, not because we're "NY Tough" (as we might see on highways signs) – but because we're Jesus-based, Jesus-tough, Christ-centered.

We come to this "**restaurant**" with about 50% capacity but 100% full of **hope** that gathered **around** this table and **in** this "meal" in which Jesus feeds us on His **Word**, we have **trust** that in spite of the **yoke(s)** and burdens that are around our necks (and surrounding our country) we will get through.

On this Fourth of July weekend, we thank God for the **yoke of freedom** that **fits** on our nation. We pray for those who have sacrificed their lives to defend it, and for those who keep us safe in our community now. May we never take them for granted.

Our nation was founded on belief in God. The Declaration of Independence begins: "We hold these truths to be self-evident, that **all** lives are created equal, and all lives are endowed by the Creator with inalienable rights."

Page 3 - 14th Sunday of Year A – July 5th 2020

Our Founding Fathers may have opted for separation of Church and state, but **not** for a separation of God and state. What the Constitution guarantees is not freedom FROM religion but freedom OF religion.

So, let us take a moment today to thank God for the great freedoms we enjoy as citizens of the United States of America and pray for those denied their freedom.

July 4th is America's Easter. Easter is our biggest and greatest **holy day** of the year. Independence Day is our most important holiday as Americans! Easter doesn't **erase** the Cross. The early church and the church of today goes through bad times – but the new life of Easter is always possible and on the horizon. It's the same way in our country and every nation – crosses, burdens and, resurrections of hope and new life, even though various yokes (burden, struggles) remain so long as we're breathing.

Let us pray for the confidence to trust that as individuals (as families and as a nation) **if** we come to God, our problems won't be **erased** but we will find **direction** and collective inner strength and a greater sense of unity and purpose that **WITH GOD** we will get through these troubled times.

Come to me – and you will find rest for yourselves. “Take my yoke upon you and learn from me. It's a little bit “easier” and lighter – that way – with Me! My yoke is linked to you!

Msgr. Frank Caldwell