**A reading from the book of the prophet Zechariah, chapter 9**

Rejoice greatly, O daughter Zion! Shout aloud, O daughter Jerusalem!  
Lo, your king comes to you; triumphant and victorious is he, humble and riding on a donkey, on a colt, the foal of a donkey.

He will cut off the chariot from Ephraim and the warhorse from Jerusalem; and the battle-bow shall be cut off, and he shall command peace to the nations; his dominion shall be from sea to sea, and from the River to the ends of the earth.

As for you also, because of the blood of my covenant with you, I will set your prisoners free from the waterless pit. Return to your stronghold, O prisoners of hope; today I declare that I will restore to you double.

**A reading from the letter to the Romans, chapter 7**

I do not understand my own actions. For I do not do what I want, but I do the very thing I hate. Now if I do what I do not want, I agree that the law is good. But in fact it is no longer I that do it, but sin that dwells within me. For I know that nothing good dwells within me, that is, in my flesh. I can will what is right, but I cannot do it. For I do not do the good I want, but the evil I do not want is what I do. Now if I do what I do not want, it is no longer I that do it, but sin that dwells within me.

So I find it to be a law that when I want to do what is good, evil lies close at hand. For I delight in the law of God in my inmost self, but I see in my members another law at war with the law of my mind, making me captive to the law of sin that dwells in my members. Wretched man that I am! Who will rescue me from this body of death? Thanks be to God through Jesus Christ our Lord!

So then, with my mind I am a slave to the law of God, but with my flesh I am a slave to the law of sin.

**Hear the gospel of our Lord Jesus Christ according to Matthew** (11: 16-19, 25 -end)

‘But to what will I compare this generation? It is like children sitting in the market-places and calling to one another, “We played the flute for you, and you did not dance; we wailed, and you did not mourn.”

For John came neither eating nor drinking, and they say, “He has a demon”; the Son of Man came eating and drinking, and they say, “Look, a glutton and a drunkard, a friend of tax-collectors and sinners!” Yet wisdom is vindicated by her deeds.’

At that time Jesus said, ‘I thank you, Father, Lord of heaven and earth, because you have hidden these things from the wise and the intelligent and have revealed them to infants; yes, Father, for such was your gracious will. All things have been handed over to me by my Father; and no one knows the Son except the Father, and no one knows the Father except the Son and anyone to whom the Son chooses to reveal him.

‘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.’

**May I speak in the name of God: Father, Son and Holy Spirit. Amen**

So. The single question I have most frequently been asked this week is: when will the church reopen? Church-goers want to know it; non-church-goers want to know it; baptism families want to know; wedding couples want to know; and funeral families; and anyone else who knows what my day-job is …

Slowly though – and carefully, most of us – we are coming out of lockdown. Having been allowed back to the pub, people now want to ask when they might be back in the office, and how soon they can go away on holiday. I saw some pictures of people nose to tail down the A303 yesterday, like lemmings heading not for the water but for Cornwall – well maybe for the water too.

But like many other people, I am a bit ambivalent about this loosening of the rules. They are simultaneously wearing me down while still giving me a safety net against the world. If I am entirely honest, I feel safe doing this live-streaming thing: I know where these parameters are now – although it wasn’t always thus, and the early days of it were fraught with anxiety. And I know too that people have joined in worship who wouldn’t be able, by dint of lack of mobility or distance or whatever, to come through the doors of St Peter’s in other circumstances, which has been a positive experience for all of us I think.

But now we have been given a whole new set of operating instructions – and believe me, they are not clear, and they are nothing like the old ones from last time we were all gathered in church. I for one – I can’t speak for the churchwardens and PCC – but I for one am finding them already a heavy burden. We have the health of so many people in our hands.

But how do we decide how many people the building can reasonably hold? How do we manage entry and exit? How do we manage who comes? Sell tickets? Have a booking system? And how many services a week do we need? And that’s even before we get stuck into the queues of patient people who want to bring their children to baptism, and the poor couples who are hoping we can read their banns so that they can get married.

And that is all a long way round to saying: please bear with us; we will open the church when we are sure we have completed every risk assessment and thought through all the many issues. We want to open the doors to all of you who have been longing for this moment, and encourage through the doors all those of you who haven’t tried us in person before – but we need to do it in a way that can be life-giving for us all, not **un**necessarily draining or anxiety-inducing.

There was some research conducted in the last few weeks among clergy, asking how lockdown was making them feel. And the three most-used words were: tired, overwhelmed and lonely. I get that.

So what is in this gospel reading this morning that can help us through this? Come unto me all you who labour and are heavy-laden, and I will give you rest. (I’m sure many of you, like me, can’t hear that phrase without also hearing Handel’s Messiah.)

So here we are with Jesus saying: come to me; take my yoke on you. And I remember when I first encountered that Messiah solo, I heard those words in a cynical way – sort of: you think you’ve got problems, try mine. (Which was clearly nonsense, but I was quite young and not versed in either music or Jesus).

And just unpicking that: come to me and I will give you rest, says Jesus. But he’s not offering a holiday – it’s not: just chill or take an air bridge to Portugal or wherever. And it’s not: Take my yoke, - and carry the cross for yourself. It’s take my yoke – because my yoke will be easier.

Remember that animals – oxen most often – would be yoked together in pairs to do the work; so to be yoked to – or with – Jesus is to have him share the weight of the work. It is not an antidote to exhaustion so much as whole-hearted lifelong accompaniment of us by Jesus.

A yoke joins two together and if the two don’t do it right, disaster ensues. If you rush ahead, you end up dragging the other partner along and being utterly shattered; if you lag behind, the furrow you plough won’t be straight and your partner will be shattered.

So in life, if things aren’t working, how much of that is due to the fact that the yoke has become unhooked in some way? And needs to be rehooked. If you look at the sheer volume of work that some of the most saintly people get through – my mind went straight to Mother Teresa – then you sort of see that they can’t possibly be doing all that in their own strength – they must be yoked with Jesus.

And in twenty-first century terms what does that mean? It means living out a sense of calling and purpose. When we are in that right place, with the right team, we can keep going for ever. Yoking is about alignment; literally ‘walking with’. And that **with-ness** is important. Because if we are doing things FOR Jesus, it is not ‘with’ – so by definition, it must be ‘without’. As one theologian put it: any work we are doing FOR God will be killing the work that God is trying to do in and with us.

I was in a meeting earlier this week – I daren’t say which – where people spent a lot of time complaining and frustrated. And when they do that, they end up doing nothing at all useful. Whether out of fear or whatever, they simply don’t engage and they come up with all manner of spurious reasons for not making a commitment to a cause. And that leads to frustration and exhaustion and overwhelmedness. Come unto me, says Jesus.

Look at the people around Jesus in his day: he despaired when people came to him and complained about John the Baptist – who looked odd and wild, and dressed strangely - and they said he had a demon. And then along came Jesus, and he was a bit of a party guy, who ate and drank and socialised with all sorts, not all of them terribly savoury – and people called him a glutton and a drunkard. And Jesus said: you just don’t get it, do you.

If things don’t work the way we think they ought to, we get fed up and assume they are wrong. Maybe we need to take heed of that ourselves - maybe we don’t get it either – I’m pretty certain I don’t.

So due humility is required, and a bit of what a friend of mine calls holy hesitation.

But we know that once we are properly yoked with him, we will find the way forward. And if we do that in all our dealings with the world, we truly have nothing more to fear.

**Amen**