

**14<sup>th</sup> Sunday in Ordinary Time (A)**  
**Romans 7:15-25a & Matthew 11:25-30**  
***Freedom from religious exhaustion***

What affect does religion have on you? And if you asked that question of your friends who have little or no contact with the church, I wonder how they would respond. Some will describe, with justification, some very negative experiences of religion. When I have those conversations, what people portray is often a version of Christianity that's legalistic and exclusive – loaded with shoulds and should nots. It's religion that's stifling – that denies life. Yet, Jesus once remarked, 'I came that they may have life, and have it abundantly' – 'to have life in all its fullness.'

I don't want anything to do with religion that's so heavy and loaded down with rules, that it denies life in all its fullness. That's a form of religion that leaves people spending their energy trying to get everything right and having to have the correct answers. It's oppressive, even scary. What happens if I get it wrong or fail?

This is nothing new. It was an issue that Jesus had to address. It's what he's responding to when, in the Gospel reading, he 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."

I like how *The Message* paraphrases it:

Are you tired? Worn out? Burned out on religion? Come to me. Get away with me and you'll recover your life. I'll show you how to take a real rest. Walk with me and work with me – watch how I do it. Learn the unforced rhythms of grace. I won't lay anything heavy or ill-fitting on you. Keep company with me and you'll learn to live freely and lightly.

Jesus was aiming his words at the religiously exhausted, those labouring under the expectation that religion was a matter of having to do this, and this, and this, and do it all exactly right, in order to be accepted by God. It's a form of religion that's loaded down by oughts – so people end up living oughtomatically – and, not surprisingly, they burn out on religion.

The rabbis spoke about the responsibilities of living by God's Law as a 'yoke' – as something people took on themselves to steer and guide them down God's paths in life. But these teachings had become incredibly complicated and hard to follow. It was a massive burden. Religion had become a heavy load.

When it's on, I follow Professional Master Chef. A criticism the judges frequently make is that the contestants make their food too complicated. There's too much in the recipe – too many things on the plate – and the diner's taste buds gets confused (and it's too easy for the chef to get it wrong). That's what the rabbis were doing. They had managed to make some basic guidelines very complex and intimidating. So, people were turned away from experiencing God's life – just as a complex recipe for puree of mashed potatoes, requiring 30 minutes preparation, can send a hungry person off for takeaways.

Jesus offers the very opposite. Instead of a heavy load his teaching, he says, is easy and the burden of learning from him is light. He says, 'come to me' – not come to a to-do list. It's an invitation to experience a relationship with a person from whom we can learn. He isn't saying that there are no God-given guidelines for leading our lives. But God's Law, the guidelines, had become an end in itself.

He doesn't want people to be intimidated by the recipe and living in fear of getting it wrong. So, he returns to the heart of God's call upon us – and that's the way of love – love of God and love of others. In this way, and this way only, will we find peace, rest, and refreshment.

We seek to live a life determined and shaped by love because God loves us. We want to love others, not because of a rule that's been set down, but because God first loved us, and that love leads us to share it with others. That's the nature of love. The relationship that Jesus invites us to come into is one that enables us to make love real.

This isn't always easy. Paul knew this. Writing to the Romans, he describes an inner tug-of-war that I've found, as I'm sure you have, to be very real. It's the tension between knowing what the right thing to do is – what is the true response of love – and the desire to do the very opposite. Familiar? But as Paul found, when we live our lives based on a relationship of love with God – when we keep company with Jesus – we learn to live freely and lightly, and God's grace gradually transforms us.

Following Jesus is, of course, demanding. To love is no easy business. It carries risks and challenges – and Jesus made this very clear. It's also a lifetime response. But when we choose this path, we discover this is where life in all its fullness is to be found. We no longer have to prove ourselves – no longer have to spend our energy ticking off to do lists – but simply to rest in his company of love and to live freely and lightly.

*Alister Hendery*  
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