

The Eighth Sunday of Pentecost

July 6, 2008

Genesis 24:34-38, 42-49, 58-67

Psalm 45:11-18

Romans 7:15-25a

Matthew 11:16-19, 25-30

In the name of God, Father, Son, and Holy Spirit.

Jesus speaks of a yoke – what is that? I am sure we've all seen pictures of a yoke, perhaps seen one in person in Colonial Williamsburg or in some other living history display. It's no more than a big piece of wood, a beam shaped to fit across the neck and shoulders of two big draft animals, perhaps oxen. The beam is attached to traces that lead to a plow or a wagon. The entire purpose of the yoke is to allow the two to work and pull together as one. Two pulling together can do far more than one alone.

In his letter to the Romans, Paul has a different sort of yoke. His yoke is not making his life and his work easier; his yoke is a burden. It's as though there were two of him, as though he could look aside and see himself, a very different Paul not working in harmony with him but pulling against him.

Paul really wants to be good. He has encountered Jesus Christ and knows well exactly what he, Paul, should do to follow Our Lord. In fact he is so certain what one must do to follow Jesus that he writes letters telling people about it, laying down the rules to all sorts of little churches. We are still reading those letters several thousand years later.

But then there is the other half of the yoke. There is that part of Paul that does not follow his own advice. As good as Paul would be, the other half thwarts him and does what is evil in his sight; the other half pulls against him. Of course, unless two halves pull together a yoke is useless, nothing is accomplished, and Paul feels that he is getting nowhere.

That's not such an uncommon situation is it? Do we not all know people who seem to betray their own best intentions and defeat themselves again and again? It's not that they don't know what they should or could do. They aren't fools, and Paul is no fool. It's as though, as with Paul, something holds them back. I know there are all sorts of psychiatric explanations for that obstruction, all of which are, I'm sure, valid. I can try to understand them, to help them, to encourage them, try to help them to pull in the right direction, but, in all honesty, I know I can't change them. The question is, who or what can?

So Jesus says, "Take my yoke upon you." That's an offer to take up the other half of the yoke and pull with us. Jesus isn't saying that he'll do all the work and pull the load alone. He expects us to do at least fifty percent of the task, but He does offer to lighten the load. His yoke is easy; His burden is light. Our burden is light, whatever that burden might be.

It really comes down to our choice between two options. We can, of course, be like Paul and just bemoan our failures, acting as though we are powerless to do better, or we can listen to Jesus and accept His offer.

In His Holy Name.