

A Burden Shared

Matthew 11:25-30

11th Sunday after Pentecost

21st August 2011

I am constantly amazed at some of the inane comments that journalists make these days. Especially the much-vaunted media gurus who inhabit the 24 hour rolling news channels, giving their expert opinions on everything and anything, the consequential and, more often than not, the inconsequential.

A couple of weeks back, a CNN panel was discussing the state of the American presidency. Instead of all the weighty political matters they could have been discussing, the talk turned to the changing colour of President Obama's hair. Both Republican and Democrat commentators expressed surprise that his previously dark, curly hair was now showing signs of grey. It must be the stress of his high office that was getting to him, they agreed.

But I wonder if it did not occur to them that the man has now turned 50 years of age – did he not celebrate a birthday recently? – and that the majority of men, presidents not excluded, do get a little greyer as the years go by. That is nothing to do with stress but simply a normal part of the ageing process, dictated by genetics and by the fact that, over the years, hair loses the melanin that gives it colour.

Of course, there are those of us men whose hair began to turn grey when we were in our 20s. And that is something that could not have been due to stress because it happened before we got married!

I have actually been quite impressed by the way in which Barack Obama has weathered the storm of the presidency. Unlike some of his predecessors who turned into old men during their term of office, Obama has retained his youthfulness. And it's amazing that he has because, when you think about it, being US president is a killer of a job. Not only is the schedule extremely hectic but the responsibilities of such high office are immense, having to worry about debt-ceilings, plunging stock markets and global politics, as well as making decisions that can have repercussions that affect millions of lives. And added to this is the fact that nobody loves you, you can't do anything right and even your staunchest supporters become your severest critics. What a burden for one person to carry!

You and I, of course, will never know the burdens borne by a president or a prime minister or others in high-stress jobs. Nevertheless, we each have our own burdens in life that are equally onerous albeit in a different context.

It may be the burden of our personal finances that we have to carry, not knowing how we are going to pay the next bill.

It may be the burden of family worries, relatives that don't get along with each other, or a child or grandchild that has strayed off the straight and narrow.

It may be the burden of fear. Fear of what medical tests may show. Fear of financial loss. Fear of death.

It may be the burden of grief. Grief over the death of a life-long partner, husband or wife. Grief over the loss of one's health. Grief over the loss of independence as one ages and moves into a retirement home.

It may be the burden of guilt. Guilt over something that happened earlier in our lives, of which we are not proud and constantly threatens to come back and haunt us.

Whatever our burdens may be, the words of Jesus in Matthew 11 are as welcome as a summer's day after a long, cold winter. "Come to me all who are tired and heavy laden," says the Man from Nazareth, "and I will give you rest."¹ Jesus was, of course, speaking to the people of his times who were weighed down by the burden of keeping the minutiae of the Judaistic law and, to them, his words, brought great comfort and relief as they sensed a new found freedom. 2,000 years later, our burdens may be quite different, but aren't these still the most beautiful words to hear when we are overloaded and burned-out by the stresses of life in the 21st century? "Come to me all who are tired and heavy laden and I will give you rest."

Of course, by saying these words, Jesus does not mean that he will relieve us of our burdens by transporting us magically to some sort of worry-free utopia where we have no loads to carry, no stresses to bear and no challenges to face. Far from it. He knows that real life is not like that. Real life is filled with burdens of many different kinds, burdens that we need to be carrying if we are going to live life to the fullest, burdens we need to carrying because, in a strange roundabout way, they are our saving grace.

There's a story about an Indian man named Sadhu Sundar Singh,² a Sikh convert to Christianity, who travelled widely throughout the north of his country spreading the Gospel. One day, he was journeying on foot with a Buddhist monk high in the Himalayas. It was bitterly cold and darkness was rapidly starting to fall. The monk told Sundar they would be in danger of freezing to death if they did not reach the monastery before nightfall.

As they crossed a narrow path above a steep cliff, a cry for help was heard. Deep down in the ravine a man had fallen and was severely injured. His leg was broken and could not walk. The monk warned Sundar, "Do not stop. God has brought this man to his fate. He must

work it out by himself. That is the tradition. Let us hurry on and continue our journey before we perish.” But Sundar replied, “It is my newfound tradition that God has brought me here to help my brother. I cannot abandon him, especially now.” So the monk set off through the snow which had started to fall heavily.

Sundar climbed down to where the injured man was lying. Since the man had a broken leg, Sundar had to find some way to carry him. He brought with him a blanket from his knapsack and made a sling out of it. He got the man into the sling and hoisted him onto his back. Then together they began the arduous climb up to the path. After a long time, Sundar, drenched with perspiration, finally got back to the path. He continued to struggle with his heavy burden through the snow which was becoming increasingly deep. It was dark now and it was hard for him to find his way, but he continued going in the direction of the monastery. Although he was faint from fatigue and overheated from exertion, he finally saw the lights from the monastery in the distance.

Just then he took a step and stumbled, almost falling. He looked down and found that he had stumbled, not from weakness, but had tripped over something lying in his path. He bent down on one knee and brushed the snow from the body of the Buddhist monk, who had frozen to death within sight of the monastery. Kneeling down, Sundar recalled a passage from Luke’s Gospel: “Those who want to save their life will lose it, and those who lose their life for my sake will save it.” (9:24). At that moment Sundar realised that the act of rescuing that man, the energy expended, had saved him in that dire situation and he understood precisely what Jesus was saying and was glad that he had decided to “lose his life” for another.

Years later, when Sundar had his own disciples, they asked him, “Master, what is life’s greatest challenge?” And Sundar replied, “To have no burden to carry.”³

So we need to be carrying some burden or another as we journey through life. Jesus recognises that and, as we were saying, never suggests by his words, “Come to me all who are tired and heavy laden and I will give you rest” that we will in any way be load-free.

What he does tell us, though, is that he helps us bear our burdens by sharing the load. This is why he says “Take my yoke and put it on you”.⁴ The agricultural image he wants to conjure up in his hearers’ minds is that of a double yoke for two oxen pulling a huge cart filled to capacity. We take one side of the yoke and Christ takes the other part to help us pull it more easily

Oh, how wonderful it is when someone shares our burdens in life!

Dr. Patti Amsden, a minister in Collinsville, Illinois, tells about a woman she met on a flight one day. As they sat together, the woman shared with her the problems she

was having with her 21 year old son who was on a downward spiral after suffering severe panic attacks. The woman spoke of the grief the whole family had experienced, the doctors, psychiatrists and support groups whose aid had been enlisted, but how the young man with such a great future had progressively withdrawn from life and become suicidal.

Dr. Amsden says she refrained from coming across to this hurting woman as a professional counsellor but rather concentrated on trying to let her know that someone connected with her burden, that someone cared about her pain and disappointment.

After the plane landed and they had said their goodbyes, Dr. Amsden wondered if she had been able to help the woman at all. She was a little pessimistic, she said, but then thought, “The Bible tells us that we are to bear one another’s burdens. Perhaps, just perhaps, [during] that small window of time [this woman] was able to download her burden to me [to] enable her to endure a little longer, hope another day, find the strength to go a little further. And maybe, that little extra distance will be just enough for her to arrive at an answer to her dilemma.”⁵

Isn’t that just how Jesus helps us bear the burdens we experience in life? Not by taking them away but by sharing the load. And not just sharing for a short while but at every moment of our journey through life. Constantly giving us a power beyond our own power to endure a little longer, hope another day and go a little further.

Whatever burdens you are bearing today, be assured that, as you allow Christ to share your load, you will be refreshed in spirit as you journey along life’s way and, suddenly, those things that weigh you down will no longer seem as heavy or as impossible to handle. Wherever you are in life. Whatever the burden. No matter how seemingly impossible the load you have to carry, know that Jesus is saying to you right now, today, “Come unto me all who are weary and heavy-laden and I will give you rest. Take my yoke upon you and learn of me. For I am meek and lowly in heart and you will find rest for your souls.”⁶

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¹ Matthew 11:28

² Sadhu Sundar Singh, www.wikipedia.com;

³ Richard Gribble, “Carrying The Burden of Others”, www.eSermons.com

⁴ Matthew 11:29

⁵ Dr. Patti Amsden, “Sharing the burden of a fellow traveller”, *The Collinsville Herald*, April 5, 2008

⁶ Matthew 11:28ff