

10. JESUS' EXCLUSIVE INVITATION

Matthew 11v28-30

It was going to be just another day - and then the handwritten envelope with the red royal crest arrived addressed to Liz's sister. Inside, on thick card and under a gold crown and the letters ER, she read these words. "The Master of the Household has received Her Majesty's command to invite The Revd. & Mrs.....to a Cocktail Party to be given at Sandringham by The Queen and the Duke of Edinburgh on.....2007 at 6.30 pm. RSVP. Dress: Lounge Suit." A personal invitation from Her Majesty! Suddenly the day was no ordinary one.

This morning we find our own royal crested invitation in **vv28-30**: "**Come to me, all you who are weary and burdened, 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.**" Yes, this is a personal and exclusive invitation from Jesus, the Son of God. But in what sense can we call this an exclusive invitation? More than one person is invited, so how is it exclusive?

1. This is an invitation to come exclusively to Jesus.

It is *from* Jesus: This is Jesus Himself issuing the invitation. And He is actually inviting people to come *to Him*, personally.

Here we see again a distinctive feature of the Christian faith. It is an invitation to come to Jesus Himself. This sets Jesus apart from other figureheads among world religions. Ravi Zacharias writes: 'At the heart of every major religion is a leading exponent. As the exposition is studied, something very significant emerges. There comes a distinction between the person and the teaching. Mohammed, to the Koran. Buddha to the Noble Path. Krishna, to his philosophizing. Zoroaster, to his ethics.

'Whatever we may make of their claims, one reality is inescapable. They are teachers who point to their teaching or show some particular way. In all of these, there emerges an instruction, a way of living. It is not Zoroaster to whom you turn. It is Zoroaster to whom you *listen*. It is not Buddha who delivers you; it is his Noble Truths that instruct you. It is not Mohammed who transforms you; it is the beauty of the Koran that woos you. By contrast, Jesus did not only teach or expound His message. *He was identical with His message.* "In Him" say the Scriptures, "dwelt the fullness of the Godhead bodily." He did not just proclaim the truth. He said, "I *am* the truth." He did not just show a way. He said, "I *am* the way." He did not just open up vistas. He said, "I *am* the door." "I *am* the Good Shepherd". "I *am* the resurrection and the life." ' ('Jesus Among Other Gods' Word. 2000)

Come to me! This invitation is to come to a person not a set of rules. It is an invitation to a relationship with Jesus Himself.

But to whom is this invitation addressed?

2. This invitation is exclusively for those who are weary and burdened.

This 'party' doesn't sound as if it is going to be a lot of laughs! Only the weary are eligible. Only the burdened will be admitted. Only those at the end of their tether; only people who know they are weak and needy; those who are on their knees and looking up.

What is this all about? Jesus' audience knew very well because He was so outspoken about the reason why people were weary and burdened. "*The teachers of the law and the Pharisees ... tie up heavy loads and put them on men's shoulders, but they themselves are not willing to lift a finger to move them.*" (Matthew 23v2-4) They were weary and burdened because of the weight of religious rules & regulations. They were weighed down by hundreds of laws added to God's law given to Moses, and these required meticulous obedience. The load was too heavy for most people.

Today people are weary and burdened for many different reasons. It may be fear, anxiety, guilt, disappointment, emptiness. For many people life itself is hard and apparently meaningless. The Dutch graphic artist Maurits Escher (1898-1971) specialised in wood engravings and lithographs. He was a combination of mathematician, architect and visionary. In one of his works called 'Ascending and Descending' we see a typical Escher building with the stairs going on and around; one set going up but never any higher, and the other set going down but never lower. On these stairs walk twenty eight men. There is nowhere for them to get off. There is no rest, no respite. They must walk on and on. It is a clever, mind-pulling image. But more than that is intended. The philosopher in Escher regarded life as toil without rest, a journey going nowhere.

Come to me, all you who are weary and burdened. Those who feel self-satisfied and master of their own destiny will find this invitation insulting. Only those who are aware of their own need find the prospect of coming to Jesus very inviting. But this is not just the financially poor and the weak-willed who are being invited. The rich and the powerful may come to realise how poor and inadequate they are. Suddenly they find that pleasure and power and riches don't satisfy or numb their fear and guilt.

3. This invitation includes an exclusive offer.

Come to me, all you who are weary and burdened, and I will give you rest. Literally, I will bring you "relief" from every crushing burden, whether it be fear, anxiety, guilt, disappointment or emptiness. In some cases it may still be relief from the idea that you can only be acceptable to God by performing religious rituals or by obeying religious rules.

I will give you rest. This is an exclusive offer of a free gift. You don't have to buy it, earn it, or even deserve it. And at the heart of it is: **Come to me.** This exclusive offer is inseparable from Jesus Himself. **I will give you rest.** The Bible commentator William Hendrikson points out that Aramaic, the language spoken by Jesus, was very similar to Syriac. He quotes the Syriac (Peshitta) New Testament translation of these words of Jesus: *"Come to me...and I will rest you...for I am restful.....and you shall find rest for yourselves."*

Judaism talked of "the yoke of the law", or "the yoke of the commandments". A yoke was intended to make a load easier by distributing the weight evenly. But the yoke laid on the people had made things worse not better. So Jesus says: **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.** He seems to be saying two things here. First: *the yoke* that has been placed on people's shoulders is *in itself* hindering them. Far from helping people to carry weight – the yoke of extra rules and regulations made it more difficult. Second: Not even a *good* yoke is any help when the burden you are being asked to carry is far too heavy. So Jesus offers both an easy (or "well - fitting") yoke and a light load to carry.

This is the message of grace. Jesus offers the free gift of rest; relief from striving and struggling for peace with God. You can only find peace of mind and heart in Him. *'Therefore, since we have been justified through faith, we have peace with God through our Lord Jesus Christ, through whom we have gained access by faith into this grace in which we now stand.'* (Romans 5v1,2)

The American evangelist D. L. Moody (1837-1899) recalled how, on one occasion he was preparing a message on "grace" and became so excited that he picked up his hat, burst out into the street and asked the first person he saw: *"Do you know what grace is?"* Significantly, that person happened to be a policeman. It is still a very good question. *"Do you know what grace is?"* Many Christians know what it is as far as salvation is concerned, and then they think it means rules and regulations from there on. But grace, not law, is to be at the heart of the rest of your life as a Christian.

Notice how Jesus says **you will find rest for your souls.** The Hebrew concept of the 'soul' was very different from the Greek. It included the mind and emotions and body. Finding rest in Jesus is good news for you as a whole person. Back in 1963 S.I. McMillen, a medical man, wrote 'None of These Diseases.' Using case histories he argued that many illnesses can be prevented simply by taking the Bible seriously. This includes sicknesses resulting from stress: *"Peace does not come in capsules."*

McMillen included a remarkable section from William Sadler's 1953 textbook 'Practice of Psychiatry'. Sadler recommended prayer as *"a powerful and effective worry remover"*, and said *"a clear conscience is a great step forward towards barricading the mind against neuroticism."* He also advised physicians to encourage their patients to engage in daily, systematic Bible reading and even printed 43 different verses as examples of the therapeutic value of Scripture. One of these is our text this morning:

Come to me, all you who are weary and burdened, 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." Imagine the outrage such a psychiatric textbook might cause today in our secular humanistic culture.

4. This invitation requires an exclusive response

It has RSVP at the heart of it. You need to respond. This is not something anyone else can do for you. Nor can you suggest some alternative arrangement as a condition of acceptance. It is also important to respond quickly, because you might miss the date and time on your invitation. In fact Jesus told a parable about the importance of saying "yes" to such an invitation and the seriousness of turning it down. You can read it in Luke 14v16-24.

But how can anyone "come" to Jesus today? How is this possible? At that time it was possible to do so physically – to draw alongside Him and follow Him. On another occasion Jesus made it very clear what He meant by coming to Him. *"Then Jesus declared, "I am the bread of life. He who comes to me will never go hungry, and he who believes in me will never be thirsty."* (John 6v35). To come to Jesus is to believe in Him; to put your faith in Him.

Horatius Bonar was a nineteenth century pastor. He ministered for many years in Kelso in the Border country and was described as "the prince of Scottish hymn writers." He wrote about what it meant to him to find rest in Jesus:

*"I heard the voice of Jesus say,
'Come unto me and rest.
Lay down, thou weary one, lay down
Thy head upon my breast.'
I came to Jesus as I was,
Weary and worn and sad;
I found in Him a resting place,
And He has made me glad."*

John Wilthew. March 2007