

Homily for December 13, 2017
Memorial of St Lucy

There is a legend concerning the quiet years of Jesus, the years prior to his visible ministry. The legend claims that Jesus the carpenter was one of the master yoke-makers in the Nazareth area. People came from miles around for a yoke, hand carved and crafted by Jesus son of Joseph.

When customers arrived with their team of oxen Jesus would spend considerable time measuring the team, their height, the width, the space between them, and the size of their shoulders. Within a week, the team would be brought back and he would carefully place the newly made yoke over the shoulders, watching for rough places, smoothing out the edges and fitting them perfectly to this particular team of oxen.

That's the yoke Jesus invites us to take. Do not be misled by the word "easy," for its root word in Greek speaks directly of the tailor-made yokes: they were "well-fitting." The yoke Jesus invites us to take, the yoke that brings rest to weary souls, is one that is made exactly to our lives and hearts. The yoke he invites us to wear fits us well, does not rub us nor cause us to develop sore spirits and is designed for two. His yokes were always designed for two. And our yoke-partner is none other than Christ himself.

In biblical and Jewish tradition, a *yoke* is often a metaphor for religious instruction. In some cases, the yoke represents the commandments of the Torah that define what it means to live in a covenant relationship with the Lord. St Paul in Galatians five contrast the yoke of Christ with another yoke:

For freedom Christ has set us free. Stand firm, therefore, and do not submit again to a yoke of slavery.

What is the Yoke of Slavery? It is living according to the world's values and standards. Jesus says we are to learn from him the way of true rest. Rest here means achievement of joy. The great illusion is that joy will come from filling up the ego with goods. In fact, it will come from emptying out, from turning one's life over to the direction of God.

Jesus himself is bearing the yoke that he speaks of since he is yoked to the Father, doing only what he sees the Father doing. Jesus is, in his innermost nature, the one who listens and obeys.

What he is saying, therefore, is to stand next to him, just as one ox stands next to the other as they pull together. Just as Jesus is yoked to the Father, so we should be yoked to him, obeying him as he obeys the Father.

Today the Church remembers a young woman who in 304 would not submit to the yoke of slavery. The one fact we know about Saint Lucy is that a disappointed suitor accused Lucy of being a Christian, and she was executed in Syracuse, Sicily, in the year 304.

One can easily imagine what a young Christian woman had to contend with in pagan Sicily in the year 304. If you have trouble imagining, just glance at today's pleasure-at-all-costs world and the barriers it presents against being yoked to Jesus.

Her friends must have wondered aloud about this hero of Lucy's, an obscure itinerant preacher in a far-off captive nation that had been destroyed more than 200 years before. Lucy believed with her whole soul that this man had risen from the dead. Heaven had put a stamp on all he said and did. To give witness to her faith she had made a vow of virginity.

What a hubbub this caused among her pagan friends! The kindlier ones just thought her a little strange. To be pure before marriage was an ancient Roman ideal, rarely found, but not to be condemned. To exclude marriage altogether, however, was too much. She must have something sinister to hide, the tongues wagged.

Lucy knew of the heroism of earlier virgin martyrs. She remained faithful to their example and to the example of the carpenter, whom she knew to be the Son of God.

And so she chose to be yoked to Jesus as she looked to him to direct her in life and inspire her in death. She discovered the freedom expressed by Isaiah in today's first reading:

*He gives power to the faint,
and strengthens the powerless.
Even youths will faint and be weary,
and the young will fall exhausted;
but those who wait for the LORD shall renew their strength,
they shall mount up with wings like eagles,
they shall run and not be weary,
they shall walk and not faint.*

What an apt description of what we experience when like St Lucy we wear Jesus the Carpenter's well-fitting yoke.