

Sunday, July 6, 2014

14th Sunday of the Year (A)

Conventual Mass

Come to Me, I Will Give You Rest

Friday we celebrated Independence Day with speeches, music, and parades. Above all we gave thanks for our freedom. Just as the mood of that day and the holiday weekend is one of happiness and joy, so too our readings today ring out their joy. These readings rejoice, however, in an even greater freedom won for us by God's redeeming love at work among us.

Zechariah was a prophet of Judah after the return of the Jews to Jerusalem. In his prophecies, Zechariah envisaged a new religious messianic community with its center in Jerusalem. The time is near, a time which will usher in the end times. But contrary to the messianism of earlier times, the most striking characteristic of this Messiah is that he will be a Messiah of the poor. With the disappearance of the monarchy for several centuries the external features of this messianic ruler are now not the trappings of royalty. He has instead become identified with the devout poor and lowly of postexilic Judaism.ⁱ

This Messiah is a king, “a just savior is he meek, and riding on an ass, on a colt, the foal of an ass.” He will be a different king from those who glory in their warlike power, who ride horses, the symbols of conquest and royal arrogance. This peaceful Messiah will do away with war chariots, with war horses and the warrior’s bow. He will extend his peace to all the nations and his rule will extend from sea to sea.ⁱⁱ

We are accustomed to associate this text with Jesus’ triumphant entry into Jerusalem. And indeed, it is the only feature of royal messianism accepted by Jesus, who took that occasion to underscore his unique role as Messiah. In today’s liturgy, however, the prophecy is to be understood more broadly. Jesus was sent by God with power and authority and yet “meek and humble of heart.” When Jesus began his mission, he proclaimed blessed the poor, the meek, the merciful, the pure of heart, the peacemakers, those who hunger and thirst for righteousness. Jesus addressed himself to the poor and powerless, the sinner and the outcast. And they responded with joy and thanksgiving.ⁱⁱⁱ

The verses prior to today's gospel speak about Jesus' rejection and the growing hostility of the leaders of the people. "To what shall I compare this generation? It is like children sitting in the market places and calling to their playmates, "We piped to you and you did not dance; we wailed, and you did not mourn" (Matt 11:16, 17). John the Baptist invited them to repent, but their excuse was that he had a demon. Jesus' table fellowship with publicans and sinners also gave them an excuse. He was a glutton and drunkard.

These, of course, were not the real reason. They were camouflage that made them look good. The real reason they refused to change was because they were the religiously and moneyed privileged. They held on to what they had. Those whom Jesus ironically called the "wise and learned" blocked the revelation of the mysteries of the kingdom. They did not see how the love of God could enter and transform the human heart. They obsessed over the minutiae of the law, straining the gnat yet

swallowing the camel. And what did not fit with what they knew, they dismissed.^{iv}

Jesus was disappointed. Jesus had taught and worked signs and wonders in their towns and villages. Still they rejected him. They could not deny the reality of his miracles but these “wise and learned” men attributed them to magic, or worse yet to Satan. “Woe to you, Chorazin! Woe to you Bethsaida! For if the mighty works done in you had been done in Tyre and Sidon, they would have repented long ago in sackcloth and ashes: (Mtt 11:21). Jesus’ opponents did not recognize him as the Messiah precisely because he came as the Messiah of the poor and lowly. He came in peace. Their mindset could not see the love of God revealed in the person and work of Jesus.

Although Jesus was disappointed at this rejection by the elite, he praises the Father for the little ones who received his revelation. These are “the childlike,” who welcomed the revelation hidden from the “wise and learned.” These are the disciples and all those he has called “blessed.” They are the

rough fishermen, the publicans and tax collectors. They have no illusion of who they are. Their acceptance compensated for his rejection to such a degree that Jesus exclaims, "I give praise to you, Father, Lord of heaven and earth."^v

A child's mind is eager and open. It is not cluttered with many thoughts and opinions. A child is always learning from experience. This flexibility allows it to be open to Jesus. A child's mind is relational, totally dependent upon its parent and does not think it is something in itself. Such a mind in an adult opens the soul to God ready to enter the mind of Jesus.^{vi}

Jesus' prayer of thanksgiving is followed by a call to become his disciples, to take his yoke that he calls "easy," because he, Jesus, is meek and humble of heart. He invites those whose labor weighs them down. This includes those in his audience who struggled to be righteous by conforming to the multiple religious laws decreed by his opponents. But it also includes all those oppressed by discrimination and injustice. In fact, Jesus' invitation goes out to all who are weary, whose way is difficult. It

is an invitation to all suffering humanity, especially those whose suffering has caused them to lose heart.^{vii}

Jesus promised them rest. But it is not a rest without work. It is the rest that happens when the end for which we have been created is realized. Our hearts are restless until they rest in God (St. Augustine). By following Jesus, we are brought to the Father who fulfills us and makes of us a new creation. This rest happens when we live in harmony with ourselves, our neighbor, and God.^{viii}

The way to this rest is to yoke ourselves to Jesus and to learn his meekness and humility. Meekness is the steady flow of gentleness. It does not break the bruised reed or quench the smoldering wick. It is patient and courageous. Humility, the handmaid of meekness is truth, it is of the earth. Humble people remember at all times that they are creatures, dependent on God and meant to serve God's purposes.^{ix}

This yoke of humility and meekness, the labor and burdens that Jesus imposes are light because they are the expression of our true being. It is that rest in God for which we are made and

that supports us in all our activities in all our joys and sorrows. It is this that the child-like, the little ones instinctively recognize in Jesus. It is by assuming this yoke that permits even the great ones to be born again, to become little and participate in the Messiah's rule of peace.

i" John L. McKenzie, Dictionary of the Bible (Milwaukee, Bruce, 1965) 950

ii" Days of the Lord, The Liturgical Year, v.4, Ordinary Time, Year A (Collegeville, Minn., Liturgical Press, 1002) 114

iii" Days of the Lord, 114, 115

iv" John Shea, The Spiritual Wisdom of the Gospels for Christian Preachers and Teachers, Year A (Collegeville, Minn., 2004) 218, 219

v" Days of the Lord 116

vi" John Shea, 220

vii" John Shea, 221

viii" John Shea, 221

ix" John Shea, 222