

5 Pentecost, Proper 9, Yr. A

July 9, 2017

Zechariah 9:9-12; Romans 7:15-25a; Matthew 11:16-10, 25-30

In one way or another, today's readings touch on humility. In the first reading and the Gospel, it's explicit; in Romans, it's implicit. It's probably good to revisit the meaning of humility, since many of us were taught to think of it as a kind of breast-beating self-denigration – “worthless me” kind of thinking. But, actually, it means being clear-eyed about who you are, recognizing both your strengths and your weaknesses and owning it all.

In the Zechariah reading we get a picture of Israel's true King coming to establish his kingdom which will be from sea to sea, but it won't be a business as usual kingdom. Instead of wielding power as coercion, this king comes to transcend that kind of power: cutting off the chariots and war horses and battle bows. This king is about peace. And he comes, the text says, humble and riding on a donkey and not on a war horse as the usual victor would. This text will sound familiar because it's the reading for Palm Sunday when Jesus comes into Jerusalem riding on a donkey. It's an illustration of an entirely different kind of power. This King is coming to establish a totally different kind of kingdom. One, as the collect says, in which all will be devoted to God with their whole hearts and united to one another with pure affection. I remember reading that when General Allenby entered Jerusalem after WWI, he was prepared to ride in on his war horse but received a message, probably from the foreign office, telling him it would be better to dismount, so he, a modern day conqueror, entered Jerusalem on foot. When I first heard that story, I thought it was because he was being respectful of these traditions and texts, but I guess not. Just practical politics.

In the Matthew reading, Jesus is inviting us to take his yoke upon us because, he says, he is gentle and humble of heart. Before he gets to that part, though, he expresses some frustration at the fact that so many people refuse to listen either to his message or to that of John. In both cases, the refusal to listen was blamed on the messenger: John was too ascetic and too socially unacceptable (maybe it had something to do with what he wore and ate – along with his fire and brimstone preaching), but Jesus wasn't acceptable either because he was TOO social – eating with way too many of the wrong kinds of people. And maybe it's out of that frustration that Jesus thanks his Father for hiding “these things from the wise and the intelligent and revealed them to infants.” I'm thinking that Jesus put “air quotes” around those words “wise and intelligent” – because he thinks the Scribes and Pharisees are anything but. So this isn't a polemic against wisdom or intelligence, which are both good gifts – but against those who think they're wise when they're simply refusing to listen, refusing to have an open mind and an open heart. What Jesus was against was the kind of pride that works against the ideals of the Kingdom. That word “infants” would probably be better translated as “child-like.” Because what Jesus is talking about is a kind of attitude – to be child-like in the best sense is to be without a sense of self-sufficiency, or a sense of entitlement, and to be full of gratitude and trust and wonder, open and willing to learn. It's the opposite of those people who refused to listen to Jesus: the religious authorities, the political authorities, the wealthy and powerful – anyone for whom the current system was working well; anyone who thought they had it all figured out,

thank you very much. But to those who listened, Jesus issues the invitation to take his yoke upon themselves because he says, his yoke is easy and his burden is light.

We don't know a whole lot about yokes these days but perhaps we know enough to understand that oxen were hitched to the plow by having these yokes placed on their shoulders. If the yoke fit well, it didn't chafe and the oxen could pull efficiently and without pain. It's worth noting that just as Paul, in last week's readings set out his basic understanding that we were always going to be serving one master or another, so Jesus seems to be coming with that same assumption. There is the yoke that the world invites us to put on – that yoke is going to be about achievement, accumulation, self-sufficiency and pride and will carry us to despair, hopelessness, anxiety and egoism. The English Bible translates Jesus' saying not as "easy" because it won't be, but instead as "good to bear" – it fits, it's the right size, it's what you were made for. Another way of thinking about putting on this yoke is to think of it as putting on the mantle of discipleship.

And, finally, the text from Paul. As I mentioned, Paul, following in the tradition of the Jewish rabbis, sees humans as always in service to a master. We get to choose which one it will be. But our choice is complicated as we hear in this reading. The rabbis taught that all of us had two impulses within us – the impulse to good and the impulse to evil. Paul thinks it's a bit like having two people in the same skin, both pulling in opposite directions. And, while he says that our baptism frees us from sin, he would agree with Martin Luther, who said, when talking about the waters of Baptism, that the devil was a good swimmer. So while, in the long run, sin will not win, in the short run, it can "bedevil" us.

This reading has often been interpreted as Paul's personal confession – that, try as he might, he couldn't keep the law. But interpreters now are of the opinion that that's not the case, especially since elsewhere in his writings, Paul talks about being blameless in his keeping of the law. So, another way of looking at this reading is that Paul is talking about sin – not as doing something wrong once in a while – but as a deep-seated problem with our relationship with God. Paul understands that things have gone askew. That somehow our relationship with God has become distorted and twisted. In his own case, Paul notes that because he was so zealous for the law, he was equally zealous in persecuting Christians, only to find out, on the road to Damascus, that rather than working FOR God, he was working against him. Not only that, he was doing it with a clear conscience, sure that he was right. So, in this reading today, Paul isn't saying that the law is bad; in fact he sees the law as holy and as a gift from God. Rather, he is saying something more powerful – that sin can distort even the good – that's what he means by that phrase, "So I find it to be a law that when I want to do what is good, evil lies close at hand."

In the most recent post on the Bishop's blog, he points out that at the time of the French Revolution, there was rampant injustice and abuse of the poor but that Maximilian Robespierre, one of the leaders of that revolution, seemingly with the best of intentions, set off a blood bath that ended with the Reign of Terror and with him losing his own head to the guillotine. The lesson, he suggested, is that we hold our certainties more lightly, still acting, but with more humility – and there's that word again.

Humility – because we aren't self-sufficient and we don't know it all, by any stretch of the imagination. There's a quote in Moby Dick on this topic – "Heaven have mercy on us all – Presbyterians and pagans alike- for we are all somehow dreadfully cracked about the head and sadly in need of mending." Paul would agree with that, but he wouldn't stop there – you'll note that he ends this part of the letter on a note of hope by saying "thanks be to God through Christ Jesus," who rescues me (and us) from this body of death. Bonhoeffer has something to say on this that ties Matthew and Paul together. He says that to fix one's eyes solely on the simple truth of God at a time when all concepts are being confused, distorted and turned upside down is to be simple and at rest.

So, humility and our need to acknowledge that we aren't perfect – that we need to listen and may need to change. I have a small personal story about imperfection. When my friend and my sister were here a couple of weeks ago, we were at the stop sign by the day care center and were rear-ended. The back bumper was askew and smeared with the paint from the other fellow's car. The next day, I took it to the body shop and the owner took a look at it, took his fist and walloped the bumper, pushing it back into place and then took a buffing cloth and Voila! – Good as new. So, when I read the following story, I was primed to listen.

It's a story about a grandmother who took her grandkids to see Cars 2. The central character is a tow truck – he's rusty, unsophisticated, and unpolished, both socially and physically. He got caught up in an international spy ring and had to have his appearance changed. He's willing to be a different color, to lose the rust and have a shiny paint job. But when he's told they'll need to repair his dents, he refuses. Those dents aren't just for looks, he says. Each one reminds him of one of his close calls, or perhaps one of his mistakes. The dents may make him imperfect, but they are part of who he is. That's us, I think. Sometimes our dents are obvious; sometimes we are good at hiding them. But all of us are dented in one way or another. Jesus invites us to come – with all our dents – to God. There our weariness and burdens are acknowledged and we will find rest for our souls. (*Synthesis - Contemplative Viewfinder*) Amen.