

FOURTEENTH SUNDAY IN ORDINARY TIME

Gospel: Matthew 11:25-30

At that time Jesus said, "I thank you, Father, Lord of heaven and earth, because you have hidden these things from the wise and the intelligent and have revealed them to infants; yes, Father, for such was your gracious will. All things have been handed over to me by my Father; and no one knows the Son except the Father, and no one knows the Father except the Son and anyone to whom the Son chooses to reveal him.

"Come to me, all you that are weary and are carrying heavy burdens, 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."

REFLECTION 1:

His Yoke is Easy

In a famous cartoon, two men are standing by a large billboard that reads 'STOP AND THINK'. They stare at it for a while and one of them says 'Kind of makes you stop and think'. Today's Gospel does the same. Jesus says, 'Come to me all you who labour and are burdened, and I will give you rest...for my yoke is easy and my burden light' (Matt 11: 25-30). Upon hearing this we might stop and think that yes, indeed, we are heavily burdened – and we might even think that Jesus' invitation sounds too good to be true – like 'no new taxes'!

In today's Gospel, God and Jesus are represented as peaceable, meek and gentle. Zechariah shared a vision of the king and savior of Israel entering Jerusalem, not as a conquering war hero on a horse but as a gentle leader astride a donkey. Instead of having trumpets blare out his might, the just savior comes with words of peace for all of us. And so it transpired on Palm Sunday, Jesus entered Jerusalem riding on a donkey. To further accent the gentleness of Jesus the Gospel has him saying these words I mentioned, come learn humility and meekness from me – come share my yoke and you will find rest.

How life-giving these words must have been for Jesus' contemporaries who were eager to love and serve, but who are finding strict observance of the law increasingly difficult. Especially difficult and burdensome was the enormous weight of oral law that came down from the time of Moses at Sinai, known as the Torah. To give an idea of how cumbersome the law had become, William Barclay shares a story from the ancient rabbis. There was a poor widow who had two daughters and a small patch of land. When she began to plough, the elders told her 'You must not plough with an ox and donkey together' (Deut.). And when she went out to sow, she was told, 'You must not sow your field with mixed seed' (Lev) and whenever she forgot a sheaf in the field, she was forbidden to go back for it and so on and on it went.

In contrast Jesus offered to lessen the burdens of those who came to him. He did this by being their workmate. Fully aware of the farming methods of his day Jesus used the image of a shared yoke and shared burden to assure his listeners that they were not alone as they faced the future as his disciples. However, while he assured them of an easy yoke and rest, he did not promise them or us a life free from sorrow and struggle. He does assure them that if they keep close to him, they will find relief from crushing burdens and the crippling anxiety and misery of a sin-laden conscience.

Paul also offers assurances to those who wish to follow Jesus (Rom 8:9, 11-13). He reminds his readers of every generation that our following of Jesus is strengthened and inspired by the Spirit – through the Spirit dwelling within, we have life in us, and are not weighed down by endless rules that are hard to bear. Our witnessing to Jesus, Paul reveals, should reflect the gentleness and peaceable nature of the One who has chosen us to be his yokemate. Then by the grace of God, we too can ease the burdens of others, sharing their sorrows, lessening their burdens, lending them our hope and our joy. 'Come to me, find rest'.

REFLECTION 2:

A REST THAT RESTORES

A story is told about a doctor who completed a man's medical examination, despite the incessant chattering of his wife. Afterwards the doctor called the wife aside for a private talk. The doctor told her 'Your husband needs rest and quiet; here are some sleeping tablets'. Concerned the wife asked, 'When should I give them to him?' The doctor explained 'Madam, these pills are for you!'

In the Gospel to-day, Jesus invites all who are weary and find life burdensome to be refreshed, saying that his yoke is easy and his burden light. A yoke was a bar laid across the shoulders of a slave for carrying a heavy burden. Many rabbis referred to the law as a yoke placed on the shoulders of the people of Israel. By contrast, the yoke that Jesus invites his followers to take is not a burden but something that is gentle and life-giving.

Most of us can appreciate the benefits of a short nap. Indeed, medical experts tell us that a 15-minute nap can result in less stress, more patience and better health. Jesus is not offering a 20-minute nap, but a spiritual pause and a place to rest and be renewed so that we will be fortified in faith and energised in our service. These pauses are as necessary to our busy lives as breathing. The invitation to pause and rest was not unique to Jesus, it was deeply rooted in the spirituality of Israel: 'Be still and know that I am God' found in Psalm 46, challenged our ancestors in the faith to stop and take in the bigger picture regarding their relationship with God. As Pope Pius XI said, 'we are all spiritually Semites'. Rather than being overwhelmed by life's troubles, believers are to let go and let God act. Notice that the invitation is not simply to rest, but to take space to know and to learn from Jesus who is 'meek and humble of heart' (Matt 11: 25-30).

Meekness may not appeal to contemporary society, but it is the characteristic Zechariah used to describe the promised Messiah in to-day's first reading. Meekness means perfect trust and a lived faith; it implies strength of character and that inner strength that invites emulation. These are the lessons Jesus teaches to those who will pause, be still and come to rest in him.

In his letter to the Romans (2nd Reading), Paul acknowledged the struggle every believer faces daily choosing to follow Jesus in openness to God's Spirit – or to follow a lesser path, which Paul described as being 'in the flesh'. This was Paul's way of describing a life lived without God, without Jesus, without the Spirit. Most of us would not willingly choose such a life, but at times we teeter on its brink, when we become too occupied with the burdens of our daily struggle – especially in these times. Jesus invites us 'Come, rest, learn!'

REFLECTION 3: 'LEARN FROM ME'

We have heard the Parable of the Sower so often that we have almost ceased to listen. Yet what a wonderful scene greets our eyes today as we hear this parable (Matt 11: 25-30). Picture the landscape - crowds on the shore of the Lake of Galilee and Jesus offshore in a boat using it as a kind of pulpit. He looks onto the surrounding hills and there he observes a lone farmer sowing seed. Jesus' eyes track the Sower, so the crowds can now focus on his text as he begins, 'Look at the Sower there in the field, sowing his seed'. He opens the peoples' minds to truths they had never heard before.

There were two ways that farmers in those days sowed seed. They could scatter the seed from a satchel or hoist that satchel onto the back of a donkey, slit the bag and allow the seed to scatter as the donkey moved among the ridges. Both ways were extravagant as on unprepared soil much of the seed could be lost, trampled on, fall on stony ground, fall among thorns, and be consumed by birds, or be blown around by the wind. However, some seed did fall on fertile soil, germinating and producing an abundant harvest.

Jesus explains this parable at length. The rocky ground represents those who hear the word but do not allow it to take root and when trials come they wither away. The stony ground is the image for those who hear the word but the cares of the world and the lure of wealth choke it off and the seed produces no yield. But the fertile ground represents those who hear the word, accept it and bear great fruit - in one case a

hundredfold, in another sixty and in another thirty. Jesus used objects from nature to convey his message - seeds, rocks, birds, trees, mountains and water. He grounded the Gospel in a way we could never have imagined. It makes us think about the way Jesus drew on nature in his parables. In the Parable of the Sower he refers to parts of us that are open or not open to receiving the Gospel message. When, for instance, are we open to God's word in our lives? When, for instance, is our soil rocky? Perhaps we are compassionate at home, but less so at work, stubbornly clinging to old prejudices, placing out lives where God's word cannot penetrate the soil of our being. Perhaps there are parts of us that are choked with weeds, we have a desire to follow the Lord but are obsessed with wealth that chokes off the fruitful growth that God may wish. God may need to dislodge a few rocks and pull out the weeds in order to clear a space for God's word to take root. We may even undergo a period of suffering that opens us to God in a new way - a health set back. God ploughs, unearthing the good soil where his word can be planted, take root, grow and flourish anew. We were all privileged through our baptism as Christians to be rich soil for the word of God. The prophecy of Isaiah in our first reading is all too true - God says through his prophet, 'my word will not return to me void, but shall do my will, achieving the end for which I sent it'.