

This Sunday's Readings – the 14th Sunday in Ordinary Time – The main themes of today's readings are peace and humility.

The first reading is from the Book of the Prophet Zechariah, which dates to approximately 520 BC. The Israelites had just returned from the Babylonian Captivity. It was a period of rebuilding, not just the city of Jerusalem, but also the temple. The Book of Zechariah is divided into two parts and some biblical scholars believe even three parts. The first 8 chapters are the actual oracles of Zechariah. The remaining chapters (9 – 14) were written much later and are known as Deutero Zechariah. It was most probably written during the period after Alexander the Great conquered Judah in 333 BC. Deutero is the Greek word for second. This reading is from chapter 9 (Deutero Zechariah), which describes the restoration under the Messiah. In the verses preceding this oracle, the Lord invades the lands around Judah, which frees Judah. Since the return from Babylon, Judah had been ruled by many different nations with the Greeks as the most recent. Therefore this was good news to a war weary people. There had been no king of Israel since the Babylonian Captivity. However this king was not like the kings of old. This king, the Messiah, did not ride in a chariot brandishing a sword representing war and conquest. Instead this king rode on an ass and would be a man of peace and humility. He would destroy the symbols of war and “proclaim peace to the nations”. Fr. Roger Karban in his 1999 syndicated column adds this comment on today's first reading – “Though Christianity can't exist unless embodied in a culture, our faith must still stand in judgment on whatever culture gives it flesh and blood. History is filled with examples of Christianity changing the culture which embodies it. ... The prophet addresses a major problem confronting Israelites after the Babylonian Exile: the restoration of the monarchy. Babylonians not only destroyed Jerusalem in 586, but also wiped out the Davidic line of kings. Attempts were made to set up a royal succession after the Exile, but none took hold. The author of our passage adds a unique twist to the topic. He informs his community, "I have good news, and I have bad news." The good news: We're going to have a king. "He comes to you victorious and triumphant!" The bad news: "He's riding in on a donkey, on a colt, the foal of a donkey!" Horses were weapons of war in those days. Non-combatants rode donkeys. In other words, you're going to have a new, "counter-cultural" king. "He will banish chariots from Ephraim and horses from Jerusalem; the bow of war will he banish. He will proclaim peace for the nations." That fact that the new leader will be a king and not a democratically elected president springs from culture; that he renounces war comes from faith -- a faith which gradually changes the culture in which it flourishes”. Note that both Matthew and John use this reading in their Palm Sunday narratives.

The Gospel reading from Matthew reinforces today's themes. This passage is divided into two parts. The first part (verses 25 – 27) also appears in Luke's Gospel with very minor changes and comes from a biblical reference known as “Q”. “Q” was a book of Jesus sayings similar to the Gospel of Thomas. There will be more on the Gospel of Thomas in next week's article on the 15th Sunday in Ordinary time. This particular section is very different from the synoptic gospels of Matthew and Luke but is very similar to the discourses and prayers in John's Gospel. The second section (verses 29 – 30) is unique only to Matthew. Jesus preached mainly to the peasants. The Pharisees and

the Scribes imposed 613 commandments on the people. If they were to please God, they had to observe all these commandments. It was impossible! Those commandments were the yoke in this reading. In this context a yoke describes those things that control a person's life and the Pharisees controlled the people via these commandments. Jesus' way was different - "Come to me all you who are labored and are burdened and I will give you rest" and "my yoke is easy, and my burden light". That is why Jesus' message was so popular with the peasants and why it was so unpopular with the Pharisees and Scribes. Also, unlike the Pharisees and the Scribes, Jesus was "meek and humble of heart". Reginald H. Fuller in his *Preaching the Lectionary: The Word of God for the Church Today* adds this comment on today's Gospel reading - "The first half of this reading, through verse 27, is also found in Luke and apparently comes from the common source shared by both evangelists. It is, therefore, a quite early tradition and is sometimes called "the synoptic thunderbolt from the Johannine sky." It looks so different from most of the synoptic material and is highly reminiscent of the discourses and the prayers of the Fourth Gospel, especially the theme of the mutual knowledge of the Father and the Son. It is probably best understood as a liturgical fragment celebrating the knowledge of God that has come through Jesus Christ, and is a halfway house toward the development of the Johannine discourses. But it is deeply rooted in our Lord's self-understanding, as registered by his use of the word *Abba* for his Father. This betokens a unique relationship, which he invites others to share through his word. The second part of the reading is peculiar to Matthew. It echoes the invitation of wisdom found in [Sirach 51:23-26](#) and is also found in a shorter (and perhaps earlier) form in the Gospel of Thomas: "Jesus said: Come to me, for easy is my yoke and my Lordship is gentle, and you shall find repose for yourselves." It is another liturgical fragment. In it Jesus is represented as the mouthpiece of the wisdom of God. This is an early type of Church Christology, which again has its roots in the self-understanding of Jesus".

John J. Pilch in his *The Cultural World of Jesus, Sunday by Sunday, Cycle A* adds these comments on today's Gospel reading - "A literal translation of verse 27 in today's gospel makes its familiar proverb stand out with greater force: "No one knows a son except a father, and no one knows a father except a son and anyone to whom a son elects to disclose him." Our culture says, "Like father, like son." Jesus reminds us that his Father is like a Mediterranean patron, a godfather. This is the meaning behind the title "Father, Lord of heaven and earth," which tells us that Jesus' Father is truly in charge of human existence, of all creation. Jesus is his broker, who mediates between the patron and the clients. As everyone in the Mediterranean world knows, a patron is someone who freely selects clients and then decides to treat the clients "as if" they were family. Thus any image of father in the New Testament which does not entail the biological fact of parenthood ought to be properly understood in terms of patronage. What is peculiar about this patron? Who are his "favorites"? Infants, but not literally: rather, the simple or powerless people, those unable to do or obtain anything for themselves. Children in the ancient Middle East were the weakest and most vulnerable members of society. About 30 percent died at birth or soon after. Thirty percent of live births died by the age of six. Sixty percent did not live past their sixteenth birthday. They had little status within the community or family, and until the age of maturity, the child was considered equal to a slave. In a famine, the elder would be fed before the children. Jesus contrasts the

“powerless” as primary objects of his Father’s patronage with the “wise” and the “intelligent.” These latter are much more capable of looking after their own destiny than infants might be. In fact, these people might have the wherewithal to be patrons themselves. It would be easy for them, like the greedy farmer with the bumper crop (Luke 12:16-21), to refuse to be patrons and hoard their surplus for their own purposes. Certainly one group of wise and intelligent people Jesus had in mind were the Pharisees.

THE EASY YOKE

This image provides Jesus with a natural segue to the topic of *yoke*, a word used metaphorically to describe those things that control the lives of people. Peasants always had a yoke. For the most part, their lives as tenant farmers were governed by the wills and whims of the landowners. Their lives as rustic folk whose subsistence means allowed them to live only from day to day were controlled by religious leaders who grew fat on tithes that they hoarded in the Temple instead of redistributing to the needy. In the village setting, Pharisees laid the yoke of their 613 commandments upon their followers and others who sought their advice about how to please God. Jesus teaches and demonstrates a way of life, a yoke, that differs markedly from the one other Judean leaders taught. He promises a yoke that is easy and a burden that is light (v. 30). The peasants found this enormously appealing. Modern believers must realize that the Pharisees are not portrayed fairly in our Gospels. Still, no one would deny that their arrogance, pride, and playacting often cast a shadow on the wise instruction they offered. Modern reformers and spiritual leaders could well take a lesson from Jesus’ principal challengers. Spiritual elitism repels many more than it attracts. The best guides are those who practice what they preach”.

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