

## Lessons in Christian Humility

July 9, 2017 – Fourteenth Sunday in Ordinary Time

By Rev. Bevil Bramwell, O.M.I.

Readings: Zechariah 9.9-10; Romans 8.9, 11-13; Matthew 11.25-30

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### The One Who Is Coming Is Meek

God spoke through the prophet Zechariah to tell us of the coming Messiah. In today's first reading the prophet tells us that unlike the social stereotypes of the sixth century before Christ, unlike the figures of military leaders, nobles, and religious leaders of the time, the one who is coming will be "meek and riding on an ass." This attitude was recognized as the proper posture to adopt before the all-powerful God, not just when offering sacrifice but throughout the whole day. Allied with this attitude was the personal recognition that God's providence rules over all things, over every situation and every event. The one who is humble lives humbly all day because true life is life "under God's mighty hand" (1 Pt 5.6).

Furthermore, because of God's power the coming Messiah "shall banish the chariot from Ephraim," and "he shall proclaim peace to the nations." The meekness of the Messiah, the one who has the right attitude before God, has the most beautiful result: *peace*. For the Jewish people of the time that meant peace to worship God as they knew they were called to do. They had peace to bring up their families, and harvest their crops, and make their ritual offerings. This is what the humble Messiah would bring in a blessed time. God's people would then be able to function as a moral and worshipful community, the sign of his blessing for the whole world.

On this day, our response to the prophecy of Zechariah is to sing Psalm 145. The antiphon is "I will bless your name forever, my King and my God." In other words, we are going to be humble too. We are going to recognize how we stand before God and behave accordingly, rather like the tax collector in Luke's gospel (18.13): "The tax collector stood at a distance. He would not even look up to heaven, but beat his breast and said, 'God, have mercy on me, a sinner.'" God not only allows us fully to live out our station in life, but his humble nature permits us to be humble too: "Let *all* of your works give you thanks."

The rest of the psalm expands on how humble and gracious God is. He gives us a lesson in humility: humility means being gracious, slow to anger, faithful, and lifting up those who are brought low. So, in a sense we are called to become God-like much as Jesus commands, "Be perfect as your heavenly Father is perfect" (Mt 5.48). The psalm continues this alternation between the quality of God and the quality of the one who is faithful to him. On the one hand, the psalm tells us that God is "gracious and merciful, slow to anger and of great kindness." Then immediately following we learn about the behavior of the faithful ones as the works of God: "Let all your works give you thanks, O Lord, and let your faithful ones bless you. Let them discourse of the glory of your kingdom, and speak of your might." The effort to speak out demonstrates the graciousness of the believer, which will be important as we consider the gospel, because Jesus too is living the life of the faithful believer, before God, in the midst of his people.

### The Spirit and the Flesh

After these dimensions of humility have been laid out in the first reading and the psalm, we hear the words of St. Paul to the Romans. Paul explains the vast spiritual force of God that fills believers and bears them up. He says, "You are not in the flesh; on the contrary, you are in the spirit." The life of believers becomes an awe-inspiring new reality, a new force in the world, because the Spirit of God rests in them.

This Spirit is the Spirit of the fullness of Life, of whom Zechariah spoke in the first reading and of whom Paul further comments, “[I]f you live according to the flesh, you will die, but if by the Spirit you put to death the deeds of the body, you will live.” The Spirit of God is elevating. It is present and active among us, both as individuals and as a Church community.

Because we are living by the Spirit of God, Paul tells us, “brothers and sisters, we are not debtors to the flesh.” Here is Christian humility: Living by the Spirit of God, we defer to the will of God in all that we do, for he is the one who knows what the fullness of life is. We become humble enough to recognize that in creation, we depend on God. Paul is making a distinction here between Spirit – as in the Spirit of God – and the flesh, that is, the material world with its low impulses to ignore God or deliberately go against his will, the consequences of which are literally deadly.

However, the alternative is glorious, for it is life. Paul continues, “If by the Spirit you put to death the deeds of the body, you will live.” He is speaking of life in all of its fullness, not only here on earth but also in heaven.

## “Little Ones” Are Open to God’s Will

The gospel antiphon speaks of the “mysteries of the Kingdom.” This is another way of describing the transcendent qualities of this new life, not dominated by the flesh but under the Kingship of God. It takes humility to allow that God knows what is good for us and to accept that truth each day in order finally to find our way into the Kingdom that God is preparing for us.

This truth is what the “little ones” know, as we hear in the gospel. Jesus uses the phrase “little ones” when speaking about the kind of people who are open to God’s will. The “wise and the learned,” by contrast, are going to have problems with the secrets of the Kingdom. For they may be wise in the things of this world, but such things are confined to the material, fleshly domain that Paul’s letter speaks of, and thus they are not the things that lead to life in all of its fullness.

Importantly, God chooses to whom he will reveal the things of the Kingdom. Moreover, he chooses people who will actually hear something beyond themselves. This is the meaning of the “little ones”: they have some sense that they are little in the eyes of the world, but they also have the humility needed to receive God’s Word.

Then there is the “littleness” of the Divine Son himself in relation to the Divine Father, from whom we learn a lot more about humility. The Trinity is the root of all meaning and all value, and so the relationship between the Father and the Son, which Jesus speaks about in the gospel, has much to teach us. To begin, Jesus says: “All things have been handed over to me by my Father.” The Son, whose Incarnation shows us the fullness of humanity, is the one who receives everything from God. Similarly, the author of Psalm 23 knew that because of God he would “want for nothing.” In a commercialized world full of false values, this is the fundamental value, and the basic foundation of humility.

Secondly, as the one who has received all things, Christ is Lord of all. Life for all of us is a life under the benign reign of the Lord. And so, Jesus could say, “Take my yoke upon you and learn from me, for I am meek and humble of heart.” For us, then, remade in Christ, the receiving of all things from God does not occur as if we are free-standing and totally independent of God. Instead, we discover our total dependence on God. This is the real meaning of humility, the common thread running through the readings for today.

With this kind of humility – being open to what God is doing in the world and in us – we will respond when “the Son wishes to reveal” the Father to us. This is a revelation that continues to happen, day after day. In other words, humility leads us further into the mystery of God. If we are genuinely humble, we do not cut God down to our size or think of him in our own terms but instead allow him to continue drawing us into the mystery of eternal life. This is where and how we “find rest” for our souls.

Jesus has shown us that the fullness of life lies, not in acquisition, not in gaining prominence, but being humble in this world – humble before God and man.

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### **FOR FURTHER READING**

Sam Guzman, "*6 Ways to Cultivate the Virtue of Humility*"

Peter Kreeft, "*Weakness into Strength*"

Rafael Cardinal Merry del Val, "*Litany of Humility*"

Edward Pentin, "*Pope Emeritus' Unexpected Homily on Humility*"

### **IN SHORT . . .**

- *Humility means being gracious, slow to anger, faithful, and lifting up those who are brought low.*
- *Living by the Spirit of God, we defer to the will of God in all that we do, and we recognize that we depend entirely on God.*
- *Humility allows us to accept the truth that God knows what is good for us and to find our way into the Kingdom that he is preparing for us.*
- *God reveals the Kingdom to the "little ones" who are ready to hear something beyond themselves, not the "wise and the learned" who are focused on the things of this world.*
- *If we are genuinely humble, we do not cut God down to our size but instead allow him to draw us into the mystery of eternal life, so that we find rest for our souls.*