

**ECHOING GOD'S WORD
IN THE CATHOLIC COMMUNITY
July 9, 2023
FOURTEENTH SUNDAY IN ORDINARY TIME**

SCRIPTURES:

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| Zechariah 9:9-10 | Our King is a gentle and humble ruler. |
| Romans 8:9,11-13 | Let us live by the Spirit within us. |
| Matthew 11:25-30 | Jesus offers rest from all burdens. |

SCRIPTURE BACKGROUND:

Matthew:

We come to an entirely new section of Matthew's Gospel. Whereas chapters 1-10 had developed the theme of Jesus' authority and of his sharing that authority with his disciples, chapters 11-28 will show how the *false* Israel rejected that authority and condemned Jesus to death. Here Matthew begins to build on the fact that Jesus will ultimately be rejected by the nation to whom he was sent. Both John the Baptist and Jesus are opposed (Matthew 11:7-19). Many have witnessed the works of Jesus which were meant as a summons to faith in him; they have not accepted that witness in sincere repentance (Matthew 11:20-24).

Only the truly humble can actually see that God is at work in the life and ministry of Jesus. Infants or children are the only ones who have no prior agenda to block their vision of the humble Messiah who has come in the person of Jesus of Nazareth. Those who are like children or infants are open to the possibility that God is at work in Jesus.

The *yoke* of which Jesus speaks is a powerful symbol throughout the Jewish Scriptures. Those who serve under the king are under the yoke (1 Kings 12:4) or under a foreign power (Isaiah 14:25). The yoke can be a friendly and facilitating situation or it can be a handicap. The rabbis refer to the Law as a blessing that gives rest and reward (Sirach 6:24-25). But to the poor, a yoke is hardly a blessing. Jesus will himself lift the burdens of those who have been under an unfriendly yoke. Not only is Jesus willing to lift our burdens, but he himself is the one who embodies and personifies what it means to be "gentle and humble of heart." He does not lay any new burdens except that we love one another.

We may not be familiar with the yoke over the shoulders of those in underdeveloped societies who still carry water to their homes from a common well in the center of the village. They know what a burden that is. Several years ago, I was giving pastoral counsel to a young man who had suffered various forms of abuse when he was a child. One of his most vivid memories was that he was made to "haul water" up a steep hill with heavy pails joined with a yoke on his shoulders when he was really a very small boy. He came from a Caribbean island society where husbands and fathers abandoned their families and where mothers exhibited not too subtle hostilities toward all men, including the boys in their own families. The yoke of parental and societal abuse needed to be lifted from his shoulders.

There are many burdens that need to be lifted off our shoulders today: personal and societal forms of sin, abuses of all kinds, deprivations of human dignity, lack of educational opportunities, limited material and spiritual resources, etc. Jesus Christ and the Church must be there in the lifting of all those burdens.

Zechariah:

Following the return of Israel from Exile in Babylon, Zechariah spoke out in favor of rebuilding the Temple, restoring the Levitical priesthood, and reconstituting the community of faith in its unity and purity of purpose. A king, in the line of David, would be needed. Only then would God's ultimate will be fulfilled. A messianic age would follow. After the Exile, there is more appreciation for the poor, for those who are peaceful, those who are humble. The future king (Messiah?) will himself embody those characteristics. Whereas the horse had been associated with war, now the humble king will ride on the back of a donkey which denotes peace and humility (Genesis 49:10-11). The evangelists of the Second Covenant will utilize this sign as an identification badge for the Messiah.

Romans:

Those who live "in the flesh" cannot be identified with those who live "in the spirit." The two realms have nothing in common. Remember, this has nothing to do with our later distinctions between "body" and "soul." For Paul, the world of the "flesh" is the world of "sin." The world of the "spirit" is the world of "God's power." To live "in the spirit" is to live in surrender to the power of God in our lives. In the writings of St. Paul, living "in the spirit" is not just a matter of ethics or of correct behavior, but it consists in the very fact that God dwells in us through the power and presence of the Holy Spirit. The disciple of Christ has become the very Temple in which God dwells now on earth. The Spirit of Christ is a life-giving Spirit. Those who live in the Holy Spirit will have eternal life.

QUESTIONS FOR DISCUSSION

1. What are the burdens that you need to have lifted from your shoulders? What role does Jesus have in lifting those burdens? Do you realize that the burdens will only be lifted if you acknowledge them and if you open yourself to the power of Jesus in your life? How are you going to begin doing that?
2. What are some of the burdens that the Church should be helping to lift from the shoulders of humanity? Do you see your parish or your Small Christian Community doing any of the lifting? Give some examples of the kinds of burdens that can be lifted in Jesus' name by those with whom you have fellowship.
3. What can you do to make the role of Jesus more visible in your life? Do you have any suggestions for a more active witness to the gentle and humble power of Christ so that people might see that he has lifted your burdens?

SUGGESTION FOR CHRISTIAN ACTION

Discuss with your family or with your faith-sharing group what actions you might take this week in order to participate with Jesus in the lifting of some burdens from your own shoulders or in helping others shed their burdens.

PRAYER

*Lord Jesus, meek and humble of heart, make our hearts like unto thine.
Conform our wills to thine own will in the service of the Father.
Let us see the refreshment that you bring to our souls
with the life-giving waters of your love.
Enable us to bring that same refreshment to the souls of those around us today.*

CATHOLIC PASTORAL PRACTICES

Does the Church you know lift your burdens or does it impose heavier ones on your shoulders? When you come from having celebrated the Liturgy of the Eucharist on Sunday, do you feel lighter, less weighed down, better able to cope with the ordinary burdens of life? Or do you come away with a renewal of guilt, with a fresh awareness of shame, with more unworthiness than when you went in? Jesus promises that if we go to him, we will find rest for our souls. The Church believes and teaches that Jesus can be encountered in the fellowship of the believing community, in the word proclaimed in the assembly of faith, in the sacrament of the body and blood of Christ. We have encountered Jesus when we went to church!

The Church today endeavors to represent Jesus Christ to the people to whom it witnesses. The members of the Church itself need to see the face of the Lord in the community and in the leadership of that community. The Christ of the Gospels lifted burdens; he did not lay heavier ones on the shoulders of men and women.

In the parishes, we try to reflect the image of the loving Christ who came to save and not to condemn. Every ministry of the parish needs to be evaluated against the norm of “burden-lifting.” Every minister of the parish must strive to lift burdens from people’s lives and never to impose any that are not made by the Lord himself.

A smile and a cheerful greeting from the ministers of hospitality at the church door is a first requirement, of course.

Someone has said that the nature and the effect of the whole celebration can be ascertained from the kind of introduction and greeting with which the presider addresses the assembly at the very beginning of the celebration. Do those who welcome you seem happy that you have come? Do you get the impression that Jesus has already lifted their burdens? Or can you almost tell that they are more burdened than you are!?

People of prayer do not go around bent to the ground with the weight of life. They may be in deep pain and afflicted with many sufferings, but they are at peace in the love of Christ and radiant with joy that Christ is their Savior.

Parents and other teachers of the Christian faith should be radiant with the power of Christ who has saved them and wishes to save others through them. Either they believe this and reflect it and witness to it in their lives, or...they do not.

I would like to see the whole parish, leaders and ordinary folk alike, communicate most clearly that Jesus Christ is a lifter of burdens, that he brings peace and joy to those who follow him. Surely, more people would be attracted to him if his followers were happier.