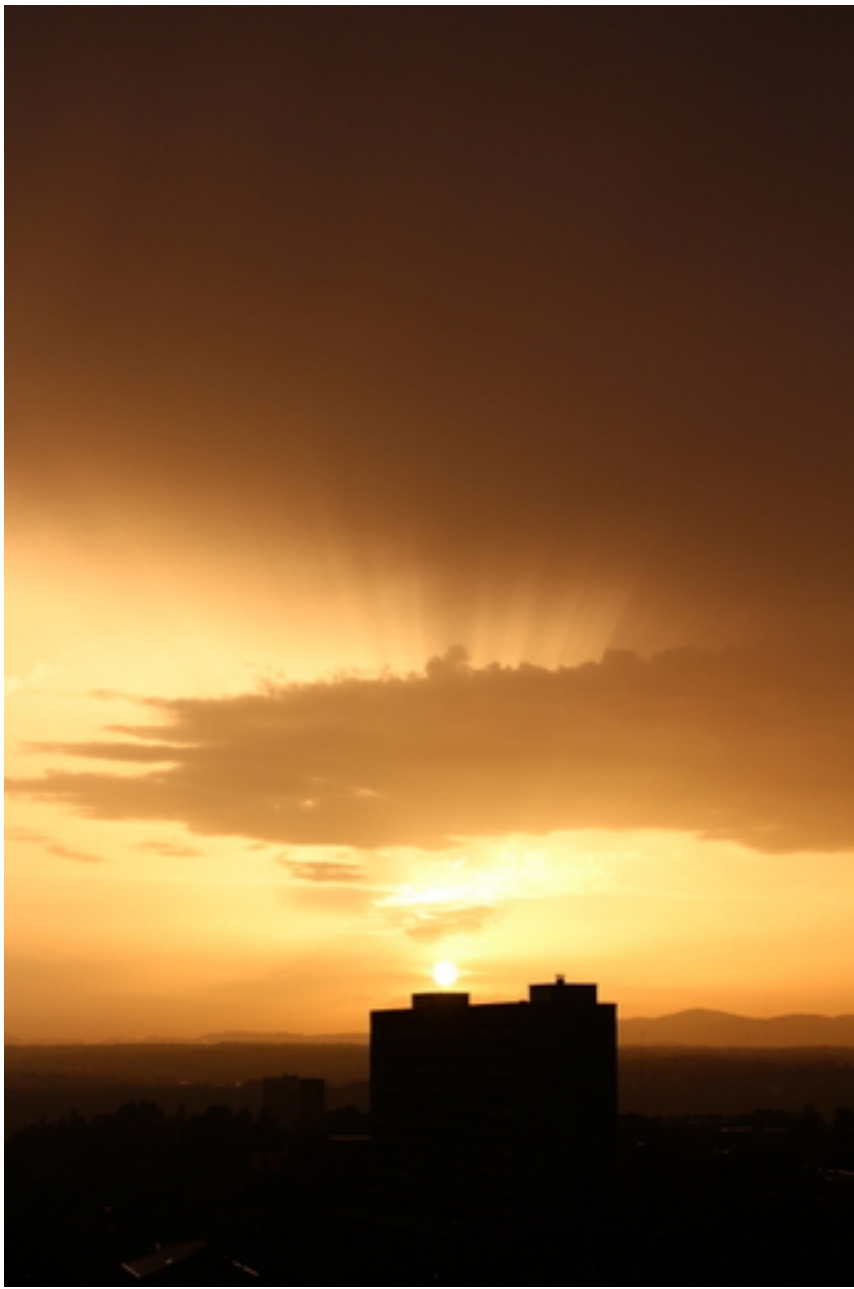


Commentary to the 14th Sunday in Ordinary Time – Year A –

THE ONLY HONORIFIC TITLE RECOGNIZED IN HEAVEN



Introduction

In the liturgical assemblies, common meals, trips in caravan, public meetings, at every opportunity, the Jewish society discussed the issue on who would be the greatest, to whom greater honor belonged.

The blessed in heaven were involved in this race for the first places. They were categorized into seven classes, led by the martyrs. It is the same with the God of Israel, who could not be outdone by eastern deities, Greek and Egyptian, to whom the title “great” was inevitably given. For this reason Solomon proclaimed: "Yahweh is greater than all the gods (Ex 18:11) and Moses assured the Israelites: “Yahweh is the God of gods and the Lord of lords. He is the great God, the strong and terrible God" (Dt 10:17).

In the last centuries before Christ, the statements about the greatness of God had multiplied

dramatically. He was "the most high God, the great" (Est 8:12q). "Lord, you are great and glorious, wonderful, strong, invincible" (Jdt 16:13) and he was expected, therefore, to manifest his greatness. We read on Christmas eve: "We await our blessed hope—the glorious manifestation of our great God and Savior Christ Jesus" (Tit 2:13).

And he appeared, in all his grandeur: a weak, poor, defenseless child "wrapped in swaddling clothes" by a sweet and caring mother of fourteen. It was just the beginning of his manifestation which culminated on the cross. From that day all the criteria of greatness have been turned upside down.

To internalize the message, we repeat:

"Only the children are able to grasp the mysteries of the kingdom of God."

-----1st Reading | 2nd Reading |
Gospel-----

First reading: Zechariah 9:9-10

This prophecy was announced when Israel was not even an independent nation. It was not at war with anyone, but it was an insignificant nation on the international stage. It was colonized, exploited and oppressed by foreign powers. The historical period is that one immediately following the conquests of Alexander the Great.

In this difficult time, the daughter of Zion, the daughter of Jerusalem is invited to greatly rejoice and be jubilant (v. 9). Zion was the name of the hill on which the city of David came up. Later it became a synonym for Jerusalem. The expression daughter of Zion or daughter of Jerusalem marked the poorest district of the city, the suburb that had arisen in the north (as an offshoot, a daughter of the capital) when the fugitives came from Samaria, destroyed by the Assyrians in 721 B.C.

It is to these displaced, destitute and needy people that the prophet addresses: to announce joy and hope: a righteous and victorious king is coming and will inaugurate an era of peace and prosperity.

The dynasty of David had disappeared for centuries. The king "who delivers the needy who call upon him, the afflicted with no one to help them. His mercy is upon the weak and the poor, he saves the life of the poor. He rescues them from oppression and strife" (Ps 72:12-14), could not be a man, but it had to be God himself.

So far nothing new regarding what the other prophets promised: Zephaniah had already predicted: "Yahweh has lifted your sentence and has driven your enemies away. Yahweh, the king of Israel is with you" (Zep 3:15). The surprise comes now: The Savior will not come at the head of a strong army, riding fiery horses, driving chariots, trampling the enemies taken prisoners, but will enter into Jerusalem "humble, riding on a donkey, on a colt, the foal of an ass" (v. 9).

Equipping the army of an impetuous cavalry had always been the dream of the kings of Israel. To procure it, they came to the point of selling their children as slaves and mercenaries of the Egyptians (Dt 17:16). But God wants to put an end to these delusions of power and grandeur. Micah foretold: "I

will drive away your horses; I will wreck your chariots" (Mic 5:9).

In the second part of the reading (v. 10) the peaceful kingdom inaugurated by the Lord is described: the battle bow will be broken and peace will be proclaimed to all nations. The kingdom will extend from the Mediterranean to the Persian Gulf and from the Euphrates River to the ends of the earth. According to the geography of the time these were the ends of the earth.

With this prophecy Zechariah overturns the concept of kingship. The king is not the one who is served but one who puts others at the center of his attention. The weak are not to be submissive to him; he puts himself at their service. His strength is what people considered weakness.

Jesus will fulfill to the letter this prophecy when he will enter Jerusalem riding on a donkey. With this gesture he will show that he is the peace-loving king announced by Zechariah.

Second Reading: Romans 8:9,11-13

Men die and so also Jesus, being a man, is dead, must die. However, he resurrected. What power made him resurrect?

In today's reading, Paul says that this happened because he had in himself the fullness of the Spirit, the power of God (v. 11).

Human life has a beginning and an end, but the life of God had no beginning and will have no end. Jesus is dead to the material life, but the spirit which was in him, raised him, and let him continue to live the life of God.

From this truth Paul deduces that, having received as gift this same Spirit, we can no longer die. When the time comes in which our biological life will end, the Spirit who raised Jesus will also raise our mortal bodies (v. 11).

In the second part of the reading (vv. 12-13), the Apostle mentions the moral consequences that arise from the new situation entered into by the baptized. He has to do works that are in tune with the life of God, with the impulses of the Spirit. If he continues to "live according to the flesh" he makes choices of death.

Gospel: Matthew 11:25-30

At the beginning of his public life, along the Sea of Galilee, Jesus has aroused much enthusiasm. He has had considerable success but then conflicts, misunderstandings and hostilities began. Many disciples were baffled by his proposals. They were discouraged and abandoned him (Jn 6:66). Even his family members were wary of him (Jn 7:5). Only a small group of poor disciples, despised by the Jewish society, was with him (Jn 6:67-69).

Our passage constitutes the ending of a chapter loaded with tensions and controversies. It opened with the Baptist's crisis of faith. He sent some disciples to ask Jesus: "Are you he who is to come or should we expect someone else?" (Mt 11:3). It continued with Jesus' heavy judgment on his generation (Mt 11:16-19) and with threats: "Alas for you Chorazin and Bethsaida" (Mt 11:21-24).

Halfway in his public life the balance could not be considered disappointing. Faced with a similar failure, we could have given up. Jesus instead rejoiced and blessed the Father for what happened.

The solemn exclamation with which today's gospel begins is one of the few prayers of Jesus reported in the gospels: "Father, Lord of heaven and earth, I praise you because you have hidden these things from the wise and learned and revealed them to simple people" (v. 25).

The wise and the intelligent are often mentioned together in the Bible and, many times, in a pejorative sense. They are those who profess themselves as devout researchers of wisdom. They even think of having a monopoly of it. In fact they rack with folly and revel with vane discussions. Against them, the prophet Isaiah had declared: "Woe to those who are wise in their own eyes and take themselves for sages" (Is 5:20-21). Jesus does not declare them excluded from salvation. He merely states a fact: the poor, the humble, the marginalized people are the first to welcome his word of deliverance. It's normal—he says—that this happens because the small ones, more than any other, feel the need of God's tenderness. They hunger and thirst for righteousness, cry, live in grief and wait for the Lord to intervene to raise their heads and fill them with joy. They are blessed because for them the kingdom of God has come. Then he adds: this fact falls within the plan of the Father: "Yes Father, this was your gracious will" (v. 26).

The deeply rooted conviction is that God is friend only of the good and righteous, prefers those who behave well and bears the fatigue of those who sin. This is the God created by the "wise" and the "intelligent". It is the product of human logic and criteria. The Father of Jesus instead goes to recover those that we throw in the trash. He prefers those who are despised and those who are not paid attention to by anyone, the public sinners (Mt 11:19) and prostitutes (Mt 21:31) because they are the most in need of his love. The rich, the satiated, those who are proud of their knowledge do not need this Father. They hold tight to their God. They will also reach salvation, of course, but only when they make themselves "small ones." The trouble for them is that of arriving late, of losing precious time.

In the second part of the passage (v. 27) an important statement of Jesus is introduced: "No one knows the Son except the Father, and no one knows the Father except the Son and those to whom the Son chooses to reveal him."

The verb to know in the Bible does not mean having met or contacted a person a few times. It means "to have had a profound experience of the person." It is used, for example, to indicate the intimate relationship that exists between husband and wife (cf. Lk 1:34).

A full knowledge of the Father is possible only to the Son. However, he may communicate this experience to anyone he wants. Who will have the right disposition to accept his revelation? The small ones, of course.

The scribes, rabbis, those who are educated in every detail of the law, are convinced that they have the

full knowledge of God. They maintain they know how to discern what is good. They present themselves as guides for the blind, as light to those who are in darkness, as educators of the ignorant, as masters of the simple ones (Rom 2:18-20). As long as they do not give up their attitude of being “wise” and “intelligent” people, they preclude the true and rewarding experience of God’s love.

The last part of the passage (vv. 28-30) refers to the oppression that the "small ones," the simple people of the land, the poor, suffer from the "wise and intelligent." They (the scribes and Pharisees) have structured a very complicated religion, made up of minute rules, prescriptions impossible to observe. They loaded the shoulders of ignorant people "unbearable burdens that they do not even move a finger to help them" (Lk 11:46).

The law of God, yes, is a yoke and the wise Sirach recommended to his son: “Put her constraints on your feet and her yoke on your neck, do not rebel against the chains..you will find in her your rest" (Sir 6:24-28), but the religion preached by the masters of Israel has transformed it in an oppressive yoke. For this the poor not only feel themselves wretched in this world, but also rejected by God and excluded from the world to come. They know of not being able to observe the provisions dictated by the rabbis and they are convinced that they are impure: "Only this cursed people who have no knowledge of the law” declared the high priest Caiaphas (Jn 7:49).

To these poor, lost and disoriented, Jesus addressed the invitation to be free from fear and distressing religion instilled in them. He recommends: Accept my law, the new one that is summed up in a single commandment: love of the brothers/sisters. He does not propose an easier and permissive moral, but an ethic that points directly to the essential. It does not waste energies in the observance of prescriptions “that has the appearance of wisdom” but in reality they have no value (Col 2:23).

His yoke is sweet. First of all because it is his: not in the sense that he imposed it, but because he carried it first. Jesus always bent down to the Father’s will. He freely embraced it while he never imposed human precepts (Mk 7). His yoke is sweet because only those who accept the wisdom of the beatitudes can experience the joy and peace.

Finally, the invitation: "Learn from me for I am meek and humble of heart" (v. 29). Perhaps this statement leaves us a bit confused because it seems a deserved auto-celebration, certainly, but not appropriate.

These words are nothing more than a boast.

"Learn from me" simply means: do not follow the teachers who act as masters on your consciences. They preach a God who is not on the side of the poor, the sinners and the last. They teach a religion that takes away the joy with its fussiness and absurdity.

Jesus is presented as meek and humble of heart. These are the terms that we find in the Beatitudes. They do not indicate the timid, the meek, the quiet, but those who are poor and oppressed, those who, while suffering injustice, do not resort to violence.

To all these poor people of the land Jesus says: I'm on your side, I am one of you, I am poor and rejected.

The passage of today's Gospel is a reason for both personal and community reflection. Which God do we believe in? Is he that one of the "wise" or that one revealed to us by Jesus? For whom is our community a sign of hope, for whom is one convinced of meriting the first place, for whom does one feel unworthy to cross the threshold of the church?

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