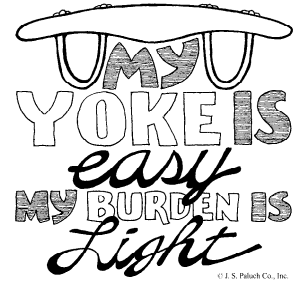


14<sup>TH</sup> SUNDAY 2008-A JULY 6, 2008

FR. JOE SOBIERAJSKI, S.J.

ZECHARIAH 9:9-10 ROMANS 8:9, 11-13

MATTHEW 11:25-30



For several decades now we have heard on both the scholarly and popular level whether certain attitudes, actions, virtues and even vices are gender specific. Are men and women in ways other than their biology essentially different or are the differences that we attribute to each sex learned from the society, culture and environment in which we are raised, taught, and nurtured? Men have traditionally been looked upon as being aggressive and competitive, while women have been seen as passive and docile. Men have been seen as logical while women as emotional. Many would say that such stereotyping is not natural but taught, and that women can be as aggressive and competitive as men; men as passive and docile as women. Women can be as logical as a man and men as emotional as women if they are given the freedom to be so. It's all a matter of what restrictions we impose on our children, and how we mold them to suit our preconceived notions of what men and women should be like.

It is one thing to talk about the attitudes and characteristics, the vices and virtues of men and women on a purely gender level, but something quite different when we consider what should be the attitudes and characteristics of both men and women as they are believers in and followers of Christ. As Christians we are supposed to somehow mirror the Jesus in whom we believe. As Jesus speaks we are to speak; as Jesus acts we are to act. His attitudes and characteristics are to be mirrored in us even if they are so only vaguely.

In our reading from Matthew this morning, Jesus tells us that He is “meek and humble of heart.” I suspect that there has been no time in human history when these two virtues “meekness” and “humility” have been sought by those who wish to exercise power in the world. As a matter of fact they are quite the antithesis of what one would seek if it was this world, this material world, this passing world that one wished to conquer. Meekness, after all, is associated with weakness. When the Bible speaks of meekness, and especially when Jesus speaks of meekness, however, weakness is not at all what He is speaking about. In the Old Testament, Abraham the patriarch and Moses the prophet are described as meek. Neither of these men would ever be thought of as weak, but instead men of great courage who with

Yahweh's help acted boldly overcoming great difficulties. In today's Gospel, of course, Jesus speaks of Himself as "meek". The Jesus who calmed the wind and the waves and threw the money changers out of the temple was anything but weak. His strength, His confidence, His determination are obvious.

If we go back to the Greek origin of the word meek which is *praus*, it is used to describe a soothing medicine or a gentle breeze. Meekness was seen as a strength that was disciplined. In the Bible, however, meekness is usually a quality that is ascribed to relationships. For instance, Jesus' meekness is revealed in His relationship with the Father when faced with the probability of His Passion and Death, "not My will but Thine." Biblical meekness is rooted in a deep and abiding confidence in God. It is not only accepting but willingly giving oneself to God's will.

If meekness is not a virtue that most people seek then neither is "humility." Again, even as Christians we seem to misunderstand the virtue. We associate humility with humiliation. We conceive of it as somehow being beaten down until we become nothing, worthless, a big zero. Yet, Jesus tells us that humble, childlikeness is a requisite for entering the Kingdom of Heaven, "Truly, I say to you, unless you turn and become like children, you will never enter the Kingdom of Heaven. Whoever humbles himself like this child, he is the greatest in the Kingdom of Heaven." (Matt. 18: 3-4). Humility is also about relationship, and we can perhaps learn more about it if we look to its opposite vice "pride." Pride is the illusion of total self-sufficiency and is completely in charge of our lives. Pride has always been conceived as the first on the list of the seven deadly sins. Through pride we defy God, and say in so many words, "not Thy will, but mine be done." Pride, in a sense, rejects a relationship with anyone divine or human.

Christian humility on the other hand is about our relationship with God. How we stand before our God, and how we see ourselves in that relationship. In His human nature Jesus taught us everything that we need to know about humility. As Paul says in his Letter to the Philippians, "Though He was in the form of God, (Jesus) did not count equality with God a thing to be grasped, but emptied Himself, taking the form of a Servant, being born in the likeness of men. And being found in human form He humbled himself and became obedient unto death, even death on the cross." (Phil. 2: 6-8) For the rest of us, Christian humility means that as God's creatures we recognize and accept our total dependence on God for our lives and every good thing in those lives. St. Therese, the Little Flower, in her humble wisdom said that

“humility is truth.” By which she simply meant that humility is knowing the truth about ourselves.

And so Jesus calls us to be meek and humble as He is meek and humble, and at the same time He offers us His “yoke”. Though we may not be an agrarian society, we have some understanding of a yoke as a wooden collar which joins together two oxen, mules or horses so that together they might do whatever task they are about. In terms of yokes, one size did not fit all. They were crafted to fit the neck and shoulders of the individual beast, and after worn for a while began to be molded to the contours of the individual animal. If like the meek Christ we have a deep and abiding confidence in God, and with Christ we acknowledge in humility that we are dependent on Him, then we are joined with Christ in carrying whatever burdens are part of our life. The operative words here are “joined with.” Everything we do is done in cooperation with Christ. Yet, that word “cooperation” seems somehow too secular to explain the mystical relationship that exists between Christ and one who truly believes in Him.

In the past few weeks, unplanned by me, I have found myself talking about martyrs both on Sundays and during the week. It is in Peter and Paul, the early martyrs of Rome, or anyone who has given their life for Christ in any century, that we can best see this kind of mystical relationship. So intimate is that relationship that the Blood of Christ seems to flow through the martyrs, and the blood of the martyrs seems to flow through Christ. Yoked together they become one being, one force which opposes death, the evil that would destroy their bond. Death, however, has no affect for, with Christ, the martyrs find new life.

That bond with Christ that we are all called to in sharing His meekness and humility does not always, and as a matter of fact, seldom reach the intensity we see so transparently in the martyrs. Paul seems to talk about the intensity of such a relationship as the “Spirit of God” dwelling in us, the Holy Spirit that gives life. That Holy Spirit has been God’s gift to us, dwelling in us from the moment of our Baptism, and constantly being strengthened by the Eucharist, Confirmation and the countless graces we each receive. That Holy Spirit most often works in our lives quietly revealing to us the countless ways in which we can witness to Christ in our daily lives. While I hate to continually repeat myself we each need to understand that the gifts and talent we have each been given, have been given for a purpose. In order for Tiger Woods to become the champion golfer he is, he had to play golf. In order for Meryl Streep to become the great actress she is she had to act. In order for Mother Teresa to become an image of love for the least of the least, she had to love the least of the least. There are men and women in this parish who are known for their love and concern for God’s poor, and others

who are known for their strong commitments to Social Justice, but only their actions showed their love, concern, and commitment.

What is the gift, what are the gifts that the Lord has given you that you can use for the good of the Church, for the good of God's people? Don't say you don't have any. That's not only false humility, it's plain cowardice. It doesn't matter if we are a man or a woman; God is lavish with His gifts to each and every one of His children. We, each of us, need to honestly look at ourselves and to see what gifts have been given us that can be used for the good of others and then simply do it, use them. Whatever you might find yourself doing, will be done yoked to the meek and humble Christ. There, as Christ promised you will find "rest", but not a passive rest, but a rest of joy and fulfillment knowing that with Christ you do His work.