

14th Sunday of Ordinary Time A “The Yoke of Jesus”

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My friends, the prophet Zechariah tells us that the true God would be revealed to Israel, not as a warlord like Alexander the Great who recently had overrun Israel, but as a peacemaker. God would be revealed to Israel, not riding triumphantly on horse and chariot, but rather riding into town on a donkey. The Church applies Zechariah’s vision to Jesus Christ, who on Palm Sunday, rode into Jerusalem, not on a mighty warhorse but rather on Zechariah’s donkey. Instead of swords and spears leading the procession, God chose palms and olive branches.

And Zechariah’s prophesy was a strange and yet a welcome one because the god of Alexander the Great was Zeus, a war god and father of the gods. When Alexander made a pilgrimage to the oracle at Zeus-Ammon, Alexander was even told that he was a son of Zeus.

Zechariah, however, boldly suggests that the Son of the true God would not be a bringer of wars but rather a bringer of peace. And we can see this in the Gospel reading today. Jesus says, “Come to me all you who labor and are burdened and I will give you rest. Take my yoke upon you and learn from me, for I am meek and humble of heart; and you will find rest for yourselves, for my yoke is easy and my burden light.”

Does this sound like a child of Zeus or a child of any of the other capricious pagan gods? Does this sound like the pagan god of Alexander the Great? Zechariah’s prophesy is fulfilled in Jesus Christ who reveals a loving and compassionate God who wills not to destroy but to save. Christ reveals a God who wishes to carry our burden, whatever that burden may be. This is a radically different agenda than the god of Alexander the Great.

Now sometimes people can get lost by Jesus’ words and so it is good to remind ourselves of what a yoke is. I visited a child in the hospital a few years back, and read him this Gospel reading. I asked him what he thought a yoke was. He looked at me seriously and said, “Sometimes people refer to the center of an egg as a yoke”. I thought that was funny.

As you know, a yoke in this instance is something that you put on an animal, such as an ox, to help till the field. Typically a yoke would have two openings in it, as it was easier for two oxen to till the field rather than just one. We know this is the type of yoke Jesus was talking about because he says, take my yoke upon you, learn from me, and the yoke will be easier and the burden lighter. What Jesus is saying is, “I am the other ox”. Whatever burden we are carrying in our lives, whatever it is we are currently struggling with, be it a death of a loved one, the loss of a job, the move into a new house, trouble in a marriage, an addiction, whatever it is that is weighing us down, God reveals Himself to us in Jesus Christ, as an ox willing to carry most of our load for us. Now notice that Jesus doesn’t say that he will take the yoke and burden from us altogether. No, Jesus only says that with him, the yoke will be easier and the burden lighter. Jesus won’t carry all of our

burdens because we must work in order to grow in the Spirit life. Christ, however, will carry most of it if we let him. Indeed, he has already done so by carrying the wood of the cross. As disciples, however, we must also carry our cross, whatever it is, and follow Jesus. The good news is, we never have to carry our cross alone. This is because Zechariah's prophesy is fulfilled in Jesus Christ.

Now, St. Paul in our second reading today to the Romans, talks about how Christ helps to carry our crosses. He writes, "Brothers and sisters: You are not in the flesh; on the contrary, you are in the spirit. If only the Spirit of God dwells in you... If the Spirit of the one who raised Jesus from the dead dwells in you, the one who raised Christ from the dead will give life to your mortal bodies also, through his Spirit that dwells in you." That, my friends, is how Christ can help to carry your cross. If we only accept Christ's Holy Spirit within us and ask that Holy Spirit to help us make good decisions, the yoke will become easier and the burden lighter.

You see, when it comes to our understanding of God, there are two extremes that must be avoided. First, we do not worship a pagan god of war and destruction who is looking for the first opportunity to strike us down with a lightning bolt if we get out of line. No, the God we worship enters into our lives not on a warhorse with spears and swords. God enters into our lives on a donkey with palms and olive branches. God wants to help carry our burdens, not weigh us down.

The second extreme that must be avoided is a lackadaisical, I'm OK you're OK, no matter what happens, no matter what I do, everything will work out fine for me in the end, god. This aloof, distant, and ultimately detached deity is also a trademark of the pagan pantheon. St. Paul says it very clearly, if we live our lives by the law of sin and death, we will die. But if we live by the law of the Spirit dwelling within us, we will live and live to the fullest. Like St. Irenaeus of Lyons, in his magnum opus, *Against Heresies*, he argues that what separates authentic Christianity from paganism is the insight which I have shared with you before, "The Glory of God is a human being fully alive." Because we are made in the image and likeness of God, God is not detached from us, but rather working within us if we only open our hearts and work for spiritual growth.

In the Gospel, Christ reveals to us how the true God escapes both extremes. God loves us and wants to help carry our burden. God, however, also wants us to grow. God will therefore give us whatever time we have on earth to till the soil of the Kingdom, to grow in love by the sweat of our brow, to grow into the image and likeness of our Creator by our work of loving God and neighbor.

And so, as we celebrate the 4th of July, let's consider for a moment the statue of liberty. Do you know what is written at the base of the statue? At the base of the Statue of Liberty, there is an inscription, "Give me your tired, your poor, / Your huddled masses, yearning to breathe free, / The wretched refuse of your teeming shore. / Send these, the homeless, tempest tossed, to me: / I lift my lamp beside the golden door."

Compare these words with what Jesus says, “Come to me all you who are weary and find life burdensome and I will give you rest.” What motivates Christ to say this? The glory of God is a human being fully alive.

My friends, let’s pray in thanksgiving for our country and let us pray that God will grant our world the gift of peace, justice and liberty. And may God give us the courage to work for it. You see, if you want a recipe for becoming more fully alive this is it. Whatever hardship we face in this life, without Jesus the burden can be overwhelming. With faith in Jesus, the yoke is easy and the burden light.