

14th SUNDAY OF ORDINARY TIME (Cycle A)

July 6, 2008 -- Deacon Bill Nourse, Ed.D.

INTRODUCTION

Some people would probably say that I have strange tastes in music. I prefer to think of my musical preferences as “eclectic” rather than “strange.” As Memphis musician Keith Sykes wrote, “I’m not strange, I’m just like you.” Now that’s a horrible thought, isn’t it?

I enjoy a lot of different kinds of music, everything from Gregorian chant to cowboy songs. I always wanted to be a cowboy. Yee hah.

Some of you may remember Ian & Sylvia – the folk duo of the ‘60s. Ian Tyson is still around, writing and performing and recording and even touring a little at age 74. Time marches on, doesn’t it? Anyway, one of his songs is called “Eighteen Inches of Rain.” I won’t sing this time – I’ll spare you that – it’s about some of the things that make a cowboy happy and content . . .

One broke horse with a good fittin’ saddle
That’s easy on your back . . .
Clear blue skies . . . eighteen inches of rain.

Today Gospel reading made me think of that song.

A “good fittin’ saddle that’s easy on your back” is kind of like a yoke that’s easy, a burden that’s light, isn’t it?

If we picture a yoke, it’s hard to imagine it being easy and light. A yoke is a big wooden beam with a couple of curved wooden loops on the bottom. It fits across the shoulders of

two oxen with the loops around their necks so they can pull together and work together.

In Jesus' time, a craftsman would carefully fit the yoke around the necks and shoulders of the oxen. What makes a yoke "easy" is that it's individually made and shaped for the animals that wear it. It's carved and smoothed so that it fits perfectly on their necks and shoulders. It doesn't rub and chafe. It's a yoke that is easy. Like a "good fittin' saddle that's easy on your back," see?

Some people say that the term "stiff-necked" came from oxen that were stubborn and refused to stand still and relax so the carpenter could fit them with the yoke. The result was that the stiff-necked oxen would end up with yokes that didn't fit and were uncomfortable. Imagine what a suit would look like if you were all stiff and strained and resisted the tailor while you were having it fitted.

All of us have burdens of some sort. Sometimes they seem pretty heavy and uncomfortable – almost more than we can bear. They don't seem easy or light at all. In Jesus' time, and even today, the rabbis sometimes spoke of the Law as a yoke. And the way it was interpreted by some of the scribes, it could be a heavy yoke indeed.

Maybe it depends on who you're yoked with – who's in the other side of the yoke.

I've read that farmers who were trying to train a young, untrained, inexperienced ox would sometimes yoke him with an older, more experienced ox to show him the way. The experienced ox would bear most of the weight of the yoke and show the young ox where to go and what to do. If the

young ox wasn't a complete "dumb ox," he would eventually learn how to act right.

So . . . when Jesus calls us to take His yoke, he doesn't mean for us to put this heavy wooden thing on our shoulders and carry all our burdens around all by ourselves. He means for us to yoke ourselves to Him. He'll bear the real weight if we just relax and let ourselves be guided by Him.

It's a strange paradox: we can be weighed down by our difficulties, and yet experience our burden as light and easy – if we allow our yoke to be fitted and shaped and smoothed by God. But if we're "stiff-necked" and resist the yoke, it's always going to be uncomfortable. We're always going to feel burdened and weary.

Like everyone else, I'd like to shed a few of my burdens. Sometimes I think I don't have a problem in the world that money wouldn't solve – and other times, I think I don't have a problem in the world that money wouldn't make worse. But I've often thought – for all my burdens, misfortunes, difficulties – I wouldn't trade them for anyone else's burdens.

In today's first reading, the prophet Zechariah writes of a king who would be meek and humble, a king who would come to proclaim peace. Of course, Jesus is the fulfillment of that prophecy. He IS meek and humble, and in Him we find rest – peace of mind – freedom from anxiety and fear.

In today's Gospel, Jesus talks about the meek and humble of heart. But consider that being meek and humble is not just keeping quiet and stepping aside and being submissive and letting everything go by. It's not just accepting that whatever will be, will be . . . "que será, sera." That's not

meekness, and that's not a Christian virtue. Sometimes we have to do the right thing even if it's hard.

In the Book of Numbers, we read that Moses was “by far the meekest man on the face of the earth.” But Moses was able to stand up to the Pharaoh when the time came for him to do so. He was pretty forceful about that thing with the golden calf. Jesus was meek and mild, but He could be pretty forceful when He needed to be. When He drove the merchants out of the Temple, that was an expression of righteous anger.

Certainly there are times to turn the other cheek, but there are also times to take a stand for the rights of God, and for the rights of others. That may not seem like meekness, but it is. Having some sense that we might, just might, be doing the right thing can relieve a lot of anxiety and fear.

Jesus also says that we need to think in a special way if we are to understand his doctrine – the trusting simplicity of one who is willing to go beyond his own vision of things to see greater realities at work. That can be hard to do after you've been living in this world for a while – kind of like that line in a Bob Seger song – “wish I didn't know now what I didn't know then.” I've often wished I could return to the naïve, simple way I saw things when I was a child.

Maybe I'm confusing simplicity with naivety. Maybe I'm confusing meekness and humility with complacency and submissiveness. There are some things in this world that we see only if we want to see them. Sometimes our own “world view” is limited and inadequate and shallow. We refuse to recognize the obvious even when we see it. We may suffer from a stony heart – from a stiff neck.

Of course, we can't just set aside the daily tasks and ordinary concerns of this life and simply ignore them. We all have responsibilities to others. But we can cultivate a greater awareness of what it means to be alive in God, and work toward that. Learning to see life in terms of its purpose in God, and direct our actions to the coming of the kingdom – that's our job as Christians.

READINGS

Reading 1

Zec 9:9-10

Thus says the LORD:

Rejoice heartily, O daughter Zion,
shout for joy, O daughter Jerusalem!
See, your king shall come to you;
a just savior is he,
meek, and riding on an ass,
on a colt, the foal of an ass.
He shall banish the chariot from Ephraim,
and the horse from Jerusalem;
the warrior's bow shall be banished,
and he shall proclaim peace to the nations.
His dominion shall be from sea to sea,
and from the River to the ends of the earth.

Responsorial Psalm

Ps 145:1-2, 8-9, 10-11, 13-14

R. (cf. 1) I will praise your name for ever, my king and my God.

or:

R. Alleluia.

I will extol you, O my God and King,
and I will bless your name forever and ever.
Every day will I bless you,
and I will praise your name forever and ever.

R. I will praise your name for ever, my king and my God.

or:

R. Alleluia.

The LORD is gracious and merciful,
slow to anger and of great kindness.
The LORD is good to all
and compassionate toward all his works.

R. I will praise your name for ever, my king and my God.

or:

R. Alleluia.

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.

R. I will praise your name for ever, my king and my God.

or:

R. Alleluia.

The LORD is faithful in all his words
and holy in all his works.
The LORD lifts up all who are falling
and raises up all who are bowed down.

R. I will praise your name for ever, my king and my God.

or:

R. Alleluia.

Reading II

Rom 8:9, 11-13

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.

Whoever does not have the Spirit of Christ does not belong to him.

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.

Consequently, brothers and sisters,

we are not debtors to the flesh,

to live according to the flesh.

For if 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.

Gospel

Mt 11:25-30

At that time Jesus exclaimed:

“I give praise to you, Father, Lord of heaven and earth,

for although you have hidden these things

from the wise and the learned

you have revealed them to little ones.

Yes, Father, such has been your gracious will.

All things have been handed over to me by my Father.

No one knows the Son except the Father,

and no one knows the Father except the Son

and anyone to whom the Son wishes to reveal him.”

“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.”