

## Fourteenth Sunday in Ordinary Time, Cycle A

Zechariah 9:9-10; Psalm 145; Romans 8:9, 11-13; and Matthew 11:25-30

This past weekend the Mississippi state legislature voted to remove the Confederate war symbol from its state flag. That emblem was placed on the flag more than 120 years ago when whites felt blacks were being given too much power after the Civil War. Although the war had been over for thirty years, many whites could not or would not see things differently. Blacks as full persons before the law, a more equitable distribution of property, a reordering of society, all this was too much for them. However, since that emblem was placed on the flag of Mississippi, slowly, hard-won changes have occurred. Somehow, now, this symbol no longer accurately represents Mississippi's heart.

I give credit to the faithful protestors who have peacefully rallied every day for weeks – for this change in Mississippi and countless other changes. They have been propelled by the anguish of George Floyd's murder into a different vision for the world.

This Sunday's reading from Zechariah likewise voices a radically different vision of the world. Israel had been conquered yet again. This time (the early third century BCE) Alexander the Great and the Greeks were the superpower. Joyful release from Persian rule turned inevitably into oppression. Could there be any other option than this revolving door of war and slavery? Into this moment of despair, God shouts, "See, your king shall come to you; a just savior is he, meek, and riding on an ass." What? A king who is just and saves? A king who is meek and rides not a horse, the vehicle for war, but a donkey, the animal ordinary people ride? Crazy, this leader will banish war and rule the whole earth, so there is no need for nations to vie for power. The king "will take the option for war off the table."<sup>i</sup>

Sit with that a moment. Imagine if the option for war were off the table. This is what people are considering as they discuss different ways to do policing or redirecting police funding to social programs. These proposals sound scary, but I am praying that they might move us beyond that horrifyingly self-assured stare of the police officer kneeling on George Floyd's neck.

To get to a point where we can picture the world differently, we must take to heart the spiritual commitment Paul calls for in Romans 8. Do we choose life "in the flesh" or life "in the Spirit?" (To clarify, "in the flesh" means all the aspects of life that are self-indulgent or self-centered and "in the Spirit" means a life focused on God and living like Christ.) Of course, we choose Spirit over flesh! We are good people! In reality, however, we struggle our whole lives with the choice. Our motivations are often muddled. We are all complicit in systemic evils like racism. Paul shoves this messiness before our eyes. Prior to this passage, he writes, "The mind that is set on the flesh is hostile to God, it does not submit to God's law –indeed it cannot" (vss 7-8). This stubbornness calls to mind Lincoln's statement, "If a [person] will stand up and assert, and repeat, and re-assert, that two and two do not make four, I know nothing in the power of argument that can stop [them]."

Jesus more gently invites us to the same change of heart. His version of Paul's "submit to God's law" is the metaphor of placing his yoke on our shoulders. As Zechariah presents a king who is surprisingly meek, Jesus presents a yoking that is surprising. A yoke is a wooden collar for farm animals; it lets the animal pull a plow and allows the farmer to control the animal. The farmer must teach the animal how to walk with the yoke and plow. So too Jesus will teach us. However, this device for hard work will provide rest when Jesus drives it; he is "meek and humble of heart." Here is one of the greatest paradoxes of the spiritual life: the more we align our will with God's, the freer we actually become. Perhaps meekness and humbleness of heart have their advantages. Perhaps it is time to put something new on the table.

- ❖ Think about other areas of life where violence is frequently a first resort. Imagine what might be if the option for violence was "off the table."
- ❖ Sit with Psalm 145 in prayer. Choose one of God's qualities you admire. Ask Jesus to teach you how to let it direct your life.

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<sup>i</sup> Nagel, Elizabeth, et al. *Workbook for Lectors, Gospel Readers and Proclaimers of the Word 2020, LTP, 2019, p. 207.*