

Homily - 14th Sunday in O.T., Year A
St. Monica's - July 6, 2014

Zechariah 9:9-10 – God comes in humility, proclaiming peace.

Psalms 145: The Lord, kind and full of compassion, raises up the lowly.

Romans 8:9-13 - The Spirit of God living in us gives life to our mortal bodies.

Matthew 11:25-30 - God reveals himself to the little ones: "Come to me, all that are weary and heavy-burdened; I will give you rest. My yoke is easy and my burden is light."

What burdens are YOU carrying? Stop and think about it for a minute. What aspects of your life – or the lives of those you know and love – seem the most difficult to accept, and to bear? Burdens come in all shapes and sizes. And no matter how rich, how famous, how integrated, how together someone may seem to the outside world – **everybody** is carrying something.

There are different kinds of burdens. Some burdens are those small but annoying things we either overcome relatively simply, or else learn to live with. Others are big, all-consuming issues that seriously get in the way of our quest for happiness. Some burdens are internal to our own lives: a struggle with an addiction, with a difficult relationship, with a serious illness or disability. Others are systemic, part of a larger social pattern: war, civil strife, poverty, unemployment, discrimination. Some burdens are imposed by situations external to us, while others are the direct result of our own unwise or even sinful choices. Whatever their origin, though, burdens are rarely easy to accept.

Maybe you are at a place in your life right now where everything is going well, where your life seems relatively burden-free, where you can now relax and enjoy the summer without any major preoccupations. If this is the case, be grateful and thank God for his blessings! But, if like most of us, you find yourself carrying burdens of one kind or another, remember: **you are not alone**. Virtually all of us go through periods in our lives when our burdens seem almost more than we can bear. During a week in which we celebrate our national holiday, when we expressed gratitude for the many blessings God has poured out on us, we know that there are many who have a heavy load to carry. We look at the statistics with respect to suicide, to the widening acceptance of abortion and now euthanasia as appropriate ways of getting rid of lives deemed burdensome – and we see that for some, life itself becomes a burden which seems too difficult to carry.

So how can we restore hope to those for whom life appears no longer as gift and blessing, but as curse and sorrow? How can we help others to recognize, as a popular saying goes in Haiti (a people that has suffered much), that “life is hard, but God is good”?

In today’s Gospel, we hear powerful words from Jesus: ***“Come to me, all you that are weary and are carrying heavy burdens, and I will give you rest. Take my yoke upon you and learn from me, for I am gentle and humble of heart, and you will find rest for your souls. For my yoke is easy and my burden is light.”***

In preparing this homily, I came across an alternative translation of this text in “the Gospel in everyday English”:

“Are you tired? Worn out? Burned out on religion – and life? Come to me. Come away with me, and you’ll recover your life. I’ll show you how to get a real rest. Walk with me, and work with me – watch how I do it. Learn the rhythms of grace. I won’t lay anything heavy on you, anything that doesn’t fit. Keep company with me, and live freely and lightly.”

Whether we like the more formal language or the informal tone, let’s listen to what Jesus is telling us. First, he says: “come to me”. When we experience something difficult or painful, when we struggle with temptation or sorrow, is our first movement to “come to Jesus”? Do we bring it to prayer, bring it before the Lord, ask for light to see it clearly, wisdom to understand it, strength to bear it, courage to act on it? Or do we try to do it all by ourselves, depend on our own strength alone to get through? As I look back on my life, I can see more clearly now the difference between those moments when I brought a struggle to the Lord in prayer, and when I tried to “solve it” myself. Let’s just say that I have learned that no matter how hard I try, I can’t pull it off alone.

That’s the whole point of the “yoke” imagery. An ox never wears a “yoke” by itself. Two oxen are yoked together. And when they do so, they can pull a weight far greater than either of them could bear alone. The hard part is getting the oxen to understand this! Until they are “broken in”, oxen and horses resist being yoked or harnessed together. Rugged individualists like us, they would prefer to “do it themselves”, not realizing that truly, there is “strength in numbers”.

Jesus assures us today that his “yoke is easy and his burden is light.” There is an old saying that “friendship halves our burdens and doubles our joys.” This is true of our friendship with the Lord, and also of our friendships with one another. In his letter to the Romans, Paul exhorts the early Christians to “bear one another’s burdens; for in doing this, you fulfill the entire law of Christ.” When we feel we are carrying a burden alone, it can seem very heavy and scary indeed. But when we bring it to the light, when we take the risk of vulnerability, when we share it with the Lord, or with a brother or sister in the Lord, it never has the same power over us.

When John and Natalie Bondyra led the marriage enrichment course here in the parish a couple of years ago, they shared a very relevant insight. In every marriage – indeed, in every relationship – disagreements and difficulties arise, both little ones and big ones. Imagine a couple sitting on the sofa together. If they allow the obstacle or source of conflict to come between them, they cannot address it together – they are separated, on either side of it. It becomes bigger than them. Far better to take the difficult issue, put it on the coffee table in front of them, and face it together. Then it becomes manageable. Then the couple realizes that no matter what troubles or difficulties arise, if they face them together – yoked, if you will – they can either be overcome, or at least shared and borne together.

Does Jesus promise us an escape from all our problems, a magic pill we can take, a trouble-free life? I’m afraid not. The same Jesus who comforts us with the message “my yoke is easy, and my burden light” is the same one who challenges us, saying “if you want to be my disciple, you must take up your cross each day and follow me.” Will there be burdens and difficulties in our lives as Christians? Yes. But do we need to carry those burdens alone? No, definitely not. We have God, and we have one another. And what is more, eventually we come to the insight that even in the Cross, there can be joy.

This current of joy is bubbling just beneath the surface of each of our readings today. In the humble Messiah who comes riding on a donkey, Zechariah sees a cause for rejoicing, a promise of peace. The God who upholds the fallen and raises those who are bowed down in today’s psalm is the faithful, gracious and merciful God in whose love we rejoice. And Jesus, gentle and humble of heart, the model of patient endurance, is also the One who cries out in a spirit of joy:

“I thank you, Father, Lord of heaven and earth, for hiding these things from the wise and powerful and revealing them to the little ones.” We all have burdens. Christians, being human, are not exempt from this fundamental reality of the human condition. But what we do have is the possibility and promise of joy in the Holy Spirit – even as we carry, supported by our friends, our communities, and our God, our various burdens and crosses.

This past Friday afternoon, I was called to the Montreal General Hospital to anoint and pray with a priest who is facing a very serious bout of cancer. For over 40 years, Fr. Murray has served God’s people as a priest, bringing to them the comfort and consolation of the sacraments. As a military chaplain and as a parish priest, he helped those who were carrying heavy burdens, by sharing those burdens, by assuring them that they were not alone. As we prayed together, we read this Gospel text, and we talked about how just as he had ministered to so many others, now it was the turn of his family and friends to come and minister to him, in his time of illness and vulnerability. And let me tell you – if it’s hard for most of us to allow ourselves to be cared for, imagine how much harder it is for a Brigadier General! Yet general or private, rich or poor, young or old – none of us can do this alone. We need one another. We need God. We are created not as isolated individuals, but as community, called to bear each other’s burdens.

Today’s Gospel reminds us, ultimately, that a faithful, prayerful life, lived within a supportive community, can help to ease whatever load we carry. So let us follow the way of grace. Let us embrace the joy to which we are called, even in the midst of our burdens and sorrows. Let us become the kind of community where those who carry heavy burdens feel welcomed and strengthened by our compassionate support. Let us remember that we are not alone: that we have one another, and our God, who in Jesus came to share our yoke and give us rest. Amen!