Opinion
Spirituality



Men carry a statue of Christ on a donkey during a Palm Sunday procession April 14 in San Lorenzo, Paraguay. (CNS/Jorge Adorno, Reuters)



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It's very clear that the lessons today are about the virtue of humility. That first lesson from the Book of Sirach is an attempt to explain to us what humility really is. It is somewhat of a difficult virtue to understand, but like most virtues the virtue is in the middle. You can go to either extreme and you will not have the virtue. For humility you might go to the extreme of being very self-judgmental and have a low opinion of yourself, put yourself down in various ways thinking you're being humble. But that's not humility; that's having a less regard for yourself than God intends you to have.

Humility isn't found in taking great pride in yourself either and putting yourself before everybody else. That's pride, thinking you're greater than others. Humility is an attempt to see ourselves as we really are, to see ourselves as gifted people made by God with virtues and gifts that we can nurture and develop. We should have respect for that and never put ourselves down or have a sense of self-worth, pride in ourselves, but always remember that whatever gifts we have, they are from God. If we're grateful for those gifts and nurture them, then we are being humble.

In the Gospel lesson, Jesus makes it very explicit with the little parable that he tells about people being invited to a feast. He gives a clue on how at least to give the impression of being humble — take the lowest place and then you'll be asked to move up. Take the highest place and perhaps you'll be humbled, made to move down. The point that Jesus makes is that if you exalt yourself without thinking of God as the source, then you will be humbled.

Twenty-Second Sunday in Ordinary Time

Sept. 1, 2019

Sirach 3:17-18, 20, 28-29

Psalm 68

Hebrews 12:18-19, 22-24A

Luke 14:1, 7-14

But if you see yourself honestly as you are and thank God for the gifts that you have been given and nurture those gifts, make yourself the full person God has called you to be, then you will be exalted, raised up by God. If we want to get some examples of this from Scriptures, earlier in that letter to the church in Jerusalem, the Letter to the Hebrews, the author reminded the people in trying to follow Jesus, he says at one point (it was in our lesson two weeks ago), "Keep your eyes fixed on Jesus." Listen to him, look at him, and see how he acts and you'll learn what every virtue is, certainly the virtue of humility.

I'll give you a couple of examples of how we should keep our eyes fixed on Jesus and learn what true humility is. You remember, I'm sure, because it's a very important part of our church year, on Palm Sunday when Jesus arranges for his entrance into Jerusalem and the people were demanding that he allow himself to be made king. He kept refusing, but finally he agrees. He will enter into Jerusalem leading a procession of people, but he rides in on a donkey, not with a warhorse, not with troops to make himself a king ruling over others.

In the Gospel of John where this is recorded, John refers to the prophecy of Zechariah, which Jesus is fulfilling: "Rejoice greatly, daughter of Zion! Shout for joy, daughter of Jerusalem! For see, your king is coming, just and victorious, humble and riding on a donkey." A king would have come in with a warhorse and with troops all around him, have a military parade to show power. Not Jesus — he carries out what Zechariah says: "No more chariots; no more horses in Jerusalem. (God will do away with them.) The warrior's bow shall be broken when God proclaims peace to the nations. He will reign from sea to sea, from the river to the ends of the earth."

What Jesus is showing us, because he very deliberately carried out that prophecy of Zechariah. He rode into Jerusalem humble on the back of a donkey, and he did that to try to get rid of war and violence, and the use of power that flows from pride. That's one way to look at Jesus, to see how he teaches us to be humble. But also, another example is toward the end of the life of Jesus, when he is talking about himself and his death.

He makes a parable first (again, this is in John's Gospel) about how the seed falling into the ground must die before new life can come. This is just before his passion and death. I've always thought that Jesus was trying to deal with what was going to happen to him — go through that agony: the scourging, the crowning with thorns,

the nailing to the cross, the crucifixion. And he helps himself to confront that by thinking about how a seed has to fall into the ground to die before it gives new life.

But then he goes on at that point and talks about how I, when I am lifted up (that means on the cross where he's lifted up, humiliated, denigrated, made to be seen like a criminal — the depths of humility), when I'm lifted up, I will draw all people to myself, because he will be pouring forth love, even on those putting him to death. Jesus dies in a humiliating way to show us what genuine humility is, but then he is raised up. The same thing can happen for us if we learn to keep our eyes fixed on Jesus, watch him.

Those are just two examples; there are more in the Scriptures. Watch him — how he acts always with calmness, with humility, with a sense of peace, and that he changes situations of hostility into situations of peace because of his humble actions. He carries out what the Gospel says today: "The one who is put down will be raised up. The one who tries to exalt himself or herself will be put down." Jesus shows us how to be humble, how to live according to the way of humility that ultimately will bring us closer to him and help us to come to know the peace that comes with being humble, being true to ourselves, being grateful for the gifts that God has given to us. When we allow ourselves to be humble, God will raise us up.

Editor's note: *This homily was given August 31 at St. Anne Parish, in Frankfurt, Michigan. The transcripts of Bishop Thomas Gumbleton's homilies are posted weekly to NCRonline.org. Sign up here to receive an email alert when the latest homily is posted.*

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