Spirituality
Scripture for Life



(Unsplash/Priscilla Du Preez)



by Sr. Mary M. McGlone

View Author Profile

Join the Conversation

Send your thoughts to *Letters to the Editor*. Learn more

July 8, 2023

Share on BlueskyShare on FacebookShare on TwitterEmail to a friendPrint

In the time before the Civil War, enslaved people sang to encourage one another. As often as not, their songs chanted coded messages about escape routes — whether literal or psychological. Thus we hear, "Gonna lay down my heavy burden, down by the riverside … ain't gonna study war no more." The first line of this spiritual speaks of a real dream: crossing the river into free territory. The second calls forth the interior freedom to escape bitterness. This song celebrates a graced combination in which a free person would be shackled neither by iron or by lust for vengeance. Imagining the humility and greatness of soul needed to pray for that sort of freedom helps us enter into the message of today's Scriptures.

The prophet Zechariah reflects a comparable combination of greatness and humility in his vision of the arrival of Zion's king. His savior arriving meekly on a donkey is a parody. It mocks the pretentious power of overlords who ride giant stallions and frighten children with the clamor of their armor and war chariots. Zechariah's people had witnessed the arrogance of such conquerors; some among them even recognized that the bullies' posturing and grandiosity were ultimately nothing more than attempts to hide the fragility of the tyrannical power.

Fourteenth Sunday in Ordinary Time

July 9, 2023

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

The prophet tells his people that God's king will be the antithesis of their oppressors. Horses, chariots and weapons will be banished under this king. The one who comes in humility has no need of weapons. His victory is based on winning the hearts and minds of the people, therefore, he is the only ruler whose reign remains safe from rebellion.

In today's Gospel reading, Jesus also celebrates the power of humility as he thanks his Father that his message has come home to the humble. We can imagine Jesus

almost dancing with joy as simple people listen to him and get it. These are people who have gotten caught up in the dynamic of Jesus' love and mission. They've been captured by the love of his tender Father. The people he describes would know how to sing, "Ain't gonna study war no more." They can face those who disdain them with the self-assurance that comes from knowing they are loved beyond measure.

Jesus says, "No one knows the Father except the Son and anyone to whom the Son reveals him." Why just some and not others? Jesus explains the privilege of "little ones," those who are the antithesis of the "wise and learned." The wise ones he's talking about might be called sophisticated. We could think of their "learning" as technology or technique, the ability to control things. Those are acquired skills, achievements of mind and muscle that enable people to manage their world.

Useful as these abilities are, they do not automatically put us in right relationship with ourselves, others or the world around us. The very word "sophistication" serves as a warning to us, for one of its closest verbal cousins is "sophistry," the use of apparently sound arguments to deceive others. We can recognize these wise and learned by the way they strut, letting the world know they consider themselves above the rest — a status they believe they have earned, as if they had chosen wisely when and where to be born.

Advertisement

The little ones? They're different. Their strength lies in the fact that they don't think they know it all. They're open to the free gift of God's love, never expecting to deserve it. The more they discover, the humbler they become and thus even more open to God. This cycle of continual growth in humility creates greatness of soul.

Not only that, but the humbler people are, the freer they become. The freer they are, the less impressed they will be by the self-acclaimed sophisticated ones. They can laugh at parodies of power and importance and feel sympathy for people who rely on them. Paul would recognize them as people who are in the Spirit; people whose humility and confidence, whose courage and humor, all spring from the energy of God's Spirit dwelling in them.

This brings us to Jesus' invitation, "Come unto me all who are burdened … my yoke is easy." Imagine the freedom of never feeling you had to impress others or

demonstrate your worth! (No more being "debtors to the flesh.") Imagine what it would feel like to have genuine sympathy for the "wise and learned," who rely on themselves, compelled to make a show of their prestige. Imagine laying down all those heavy burdens!

This is the invitation of the Gospel. When we rejoice in the fact that we can never earn it, we are prepared to enjoy it.

A version of this story appeared in the **June 23-July 6, 2023** print issue under the headline: A call to humanity.