

Fourth Sunday of Ordinary Time: Humility

Today's reading begins with a prophet we seldom here proclaimed, Zephaniah. They deal with a subject we usually avoid, humility. And they go to the heart of our Christian life, our relationship with God. The word *humility* is best understood when we consider its origin, *humus*. Humus is used in farming. Farmers call humus black gold. What is humus? It is a composition of decayed plant and animal matter. Rather ignoble. But, when humus is mixed with soil it becomes the richest part of the soil. If a farmer tills it, or breaks it open to receive seed, and the Lord provides sufficient rainfall and sunlight, the rich humus soil will yield the most bountiful harvest and the most beautiful flowers.

Like the rich, broken soil of humus, humility is the capacity to be open to receive the seeds of experience, both the painful and the enriching. Humility is the grace to let ourselves be broken like the humus, broken of our pride and our ego, so that we can be used to provide a rich harvest, far greater than we could create ourselves.

All three of today's readings refer to humility. The prophet Zephaniah calls the faithful Israelites the humble of the earth. He conveys the promise of the Lord that even when God's anger comes upon the world, a remnant of people will remain who are humble and lowly. They will not be deceitful or perjure themselves. They will be open to God working in them rather than be crammed full of themselves.

Humility is being open to God's presence. A proud person does not need God. He or she is a god to himself or herself. The original sin described in *Genesis* was the sin of pride. Adam and Eve were too full of themselves to need God. The serpent touched a sensitive nerve when he told them that if they ate the apple they would be like gods. They did not eat because they were hungry. They ate because they were proud. A humble person needs God. A humble person fears what he or she might become without God in his or her life. A humble person recognizes God's presence in others, God's truth in different ways of thought, and God's action in his own life. A humble person seeks the Lord wherever He may be found.

In the second reading, St. Paul addressed Christians at Corinth, many of whom were at the bottom of Greco-Roman society. Some were slaves, some were lower class workers, few were people of note as the world judges people. Paul tells them that position in society and family origins has nothing to do with how God's plan would work through them. God would use them to teach the so-called wise and to demonstrate the foolishness of those who are full of themselves. He uses those whom the world perceives as foolish to shame the wise, and those whom the world perceives as nothing to reduce to nothing those who think they are something.

Humility is allowing God to work through us for others. Humility is being less concerned with what we do or how we do it and being more concerned with having a life dialogue with God. Humility is taking a step away from ourselves and a step into the presence of God to allow Him to work his wonders through us.

It takes a tremendous amount of humility to be good parents, to be a good priest, and to be a good Christian. It takes a tremendous amount of humility to realize that we have to do our best in whatever we do, but God is the one who transforms our efforts into success. Good parents trust God to supply that which they lack. They trust God to work through them because they know that without God they cannot provide the best for their children. A good priest has got to realize that no matter how much work he does, as he should, the only part of his work that is worthwhile is that part which is guided by the Holy Spirit.

Modern life is often complicated. People try to balance their jobs, their family needs, the latest technological innovation everyone else is convinced is a necessity, the lack of time they have for leisure and their efforts to crowd the little leisure time they have with endless and sometimes mindless activities. People love their children, but are so busy keeping up with the demands of society that they see them less than parents of any other age saw their children.

Modern life is complex. So are modern people. Modern people try to balance their personal needs with the natural need to form lasting relationships. Many want to be giving, yet with limits. For example, many people are not willing or not ready to commit to marriage, but they still want the physical, emotional and financial benefits of marriage; so they live together rather than marry forming what is fundamentally a selfish relationship that by its nature says, "I'll stay with you as long as this is pleasing to me." Then they are astounded that their partner is selfish. When some attempt to make the transition from living together to marriage, they are shocked at how difficult the adjustment is. It is a philosophical leap to go from a life revolving around fulfilling one's needs to a life revolving around giving oneself to another. As a result, there is a higher rate of divorce for those who live together prior to their marriage.

Another example of the complexity of the modern person: The modern person is inclined to hide behind the material things of the world and then berates the lack of the spiritual in the world.

Perhaps, the twentieth-first century person is no different than people of other ages. People have always confused their lives with the desire for material goods. People have always sought happiness through selfishness. People have always been too complex to be open to the reality of the spiritual. People have always been too proud to realize that they cannot generate inner peace and happiness. Inner peace and happiness come from God.

And Jesus went up a mountain. After he had sat down his disciples gathered around him, and he began to teach them: "How blest are the poor in spirit: the reign of God is theirs....

And Jesus went up a mountain and said, "Simplify your lives. Let me simplify your lives. Just trust in God, don't let your lives revolve around other things. Be poor in spirit. Don't mourn the loss of possessions, mourn for those who have lost their

souls. Accept the presence of God in your lives, recognize your need for God and inherit the Promised Land. Don't be two faced, and double dealing. Be simple and single hearted and you will be capable of enjoying the Vision of God. Bring God's peace to others and assume the mission of his angels, be sons of God. And if you are mocked for this simplicity, this humility, so what? Your reward in heaven is great."

Only a humble person can have a spiritual life, because only a humble person senses the need for a spiritual life.

Humility is not looking negatively at ourselves. Humility is not berating everything we do. Humility is recognizing that God has made us wonderful and will continue to work His wonders in us.

From the Eighth Psalm

O LORD, our Lord, how awesome is your name through all the earth! You have set your majesty above the heavens!

Out of the mouths of babes and infants you have drawn a defense against your foes, to silence enemy and avenger.

When I see your heavens, the work of your fingers, the moon and stars that you set in place--

What are humans that you are mindful of them, mere mortals that you care for them? Yet you have made them little less than a god, crowned them with glory and honor.

You have given them rule over the works of your hands, put all things at their feet: All sheep and oxen, even the beasts of the field,

The birds of the air, the fish of the sea, and whatever swims the paths of the seas.

O LORD, our Lord, how awesome is your name through all the earth!

The humble enter into a dialogue with God to seek that which really matters. And the only things that matter in life are those that flow from God and those that lead back to God.

Today we pray for humility.