

## The Twenty-Ninth Sunday of Ordinary Time October 17, 2021

The Old Testament is full of promises God made to His people to bring them a Messiah. When Adam and Eve first sinned and had to leave the Garden of Eden, He foretold that a man would arise who would crush the head of the serpent who deceived them. When the kingdom of Israel was destroyed and the people were led off into exile, God sent prophets to give them the promise that all the tribes of Israel would be gathered back into the Promised Land and that the royal dynasty of King David would be restored. When the temple was profaned and destroyed by pagan rulers, God promised to restore the temple so that His People would worship Him once again in spirit and in truth.

All these promises pointed to a future king who would establish peace by defeating the enemies of God's people. It would be a kingdom where justice would finally prevail and where the poor would have their needs met. Prophets such as Isaiah, Jeremiah, and Ezekiel foretold that this Messiah would save the people by the very power of God. He would be a strong figure who would be able to protect the people and keep them out of harm's way.

Along with all these prophecies about a Messiah who would come in power to save God's people, there are some that are strikingly different. They are from the prophet Isaiah and are called the Suffering Servant Songs. They speak not of a figure who appears in power and glory, but one who is meek, who is rejected by the people, and who is put to death. They do not speak of someone who will save Israel with military power but who will reconcile the people to God through weakness and suffering.

Today's first reading is from one of these Suffering Servant Songs. We read that this servant is "crushed in infirmity", and that he "gives his life as an offering for sin". Isaiah prophesies that this servant undergoes "affliction" and that he suffers.

As Christians, when we read these texts we automatically think of Jesus. He is the one who comes to save us not in military power but through His suffering. He is the one who restores our relationship with God by giving up His life as an offering for our sins. On Palm Sunday, He does not ride into Jerusalem in a gilded carriage drawn by muscular horses, but on a simple donkey. And He does not simply defeat Israel's political enemies but the enemies which have brutalized God's people from the beginning - namely, sin and death. The weapons He defeated them with were not swords and arrows but the wood of the cross.

Why did God choose to save us through weakness rather than through awesome displays of power? Perhaps today's second reading from the Letter to the

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Hebrews can give us some insight. Jesus is described as one who can “sympathize with our weakness”. We can approach Him because He is meek and humble of heart. If He had come in power and glory, we might try to avoid Him. We might think that there is no way such a grand figure would be interested in us and in our needs. Just consider the political leaders of our own day. None of us can go up to them unannounced and without an invitation. But Jesus is different. He comes in humility and weakness so that ordinary people like you and me can approach Him with confidence.

That is why the Letter to the Hebrews urges us to “confidently approach the throne of grace to receive mercy and to find grace for timely help.” Though Jesus is God Most High, He is also one of us. He knows what it is to be weak, to be tested, and to be rejected. So we can turn to Him in all our needs and know that we are heard.

This is also the reason that Jesus speaks so sternly to the disciples in today’s gospel. All of them were convinced that Jesus was the Messiah and that He would fulfill all the promises God made to His people in the Old Testament. But, they had not yet fully understood that Jesus would initiate God’s Kingdom through suffering. They still did not fully grasp that God’s plan was not to establish an earthly kingdom but an everlasting one that would only have its ultimate fulfillment in heaven. So James and John ask Jesus for positions of power in His Kingdom which makes the other apostles angry.

Jesus explains to them that things have to be different among them. He did not choose them to wield political and economic power but spiritual power. And, like Him, that power to heal, to forgive, to reconcile would come through service. In God’s Kingdom, greatness is measured through weakness rather than power. Jesus puts it bluntly when He says, “whoever wishes to be great among you will be your servant;” And He holds Himself out as an example to the disciples and to us, “the Son of Man did not come to be served but to serve and to give his life as a ransom for many.”

The same is true for us. We serve a God who came to save us in weakness and humility. We serve a God who became poor so that He could serve the poor. If we claim to be His followers, then we must do the same. We cannot change this world by following its rules of domination and power-jockeying. Rather, we will change this world by following God’s rules of generosity and humility.

Today, we gather around the altar of a God who became man to save us. He gave His life so that our sins could be forgiven and so that we could live a life of faith in Him and of humble service to our neighbor. He rose from the dead to give us the hope of everlasting life in a Kingdom where we could enjoy the fullness of peace and justice.

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At this table, He shows just how far He's willing to go to reach us. He gives Himself to us in the form of bread and wine, food which even the poorest person can enjoy. As today's second reading tells us, let us approach this Blessed Sacrament with confidence because we have a God who can sympathize with us. And strengthened by this encounter with the Risen Christ, let us go from this place to imitate His humility by serving everyone we come in contact with.