

As Americans pause this weekend to celebrate the freedom from oppression which our country won through strength of arms, we are also invited by the Church to pause and reflect on a different type of freedom which is won through Christ. For much of their history, the Israelites were an oppressed people, suffering under one foreign invader after another. The prophets proclaimed that there would one day be a coming Messiah who would set them free from their enemies, and many Israelites believed that this would be a strong political leader like King David who would come and set them free through military might.

The prophet Zechariah, however, revealed that the coming Messiah would win their freedom by other means. As we heard in today's first reading, "Rejoice heartily, O daughter Zion, shout for joy, O daughter Jerusalem! See, your king shall come to you; a just savior is he, meek and riding on an ass... the warrior's bow shall be banished, and he shall proclaim peace to the nations. His dominion shall be from sea to sea, and from the river to the ends of the earth."

Yes, a king was coming who would vanquish their enemies and bring them peace, establishing an everlasting dominion. And yet, this king would not do this by force of arms but through justice and meekness. The Israelites struggled to understand what this truly meant so it is no wonder that they struggled to accept Jesus when He came to them not as a warrior king, but in meekness and humility. As we heard Jesus proclaim in today's Gospel, "Come to me, all you who labor and are burdened, and I will give you rest. Take my yoke upon you and learn from me, for I am meek and humble of heart; and you will find rest for yourselves. For my yoke is easy, and my burden light." He comes offering us freedom, although in a way that we might not have expected.

It is hard to reconcile the freedom Jesus offers with the vision of freedom offered by our society. Our society today has come to think of freedom as a casting

off of all shackles that bind us, while Jesus proclaims that we must take His yoke upon our shoulders. Our society says that freedom is the ability to do whatever we want, whenever we want, while Christ says that freedom is the ability to lay ourselves down for others in humility and meekness.

Taken to extremes, our society proclaims a freedom from morality while Christ proclaims freedom through morality. These, of course, are incompatible views. If our society is right, then we are only truly free when no one can keep us from doing anything that we want to do. This type of freedom says that we will only be truly happy when we can seek any pleasure that our heart desires. Christ, however, says that we can only be truly happy when we sacrifice our own desires.

Christ teaches that freedom from morality only leads to slavery... slavery to sin and selfishness... slavery to addiction and loneliness. Think of the simple case of a parent anxiously working to support their family. If slowly over time they begin to think that only money will make their family happy, they will work harder and harder, failing to recognize that their focus on wealth keeps them from the true happiness of having a relationship with their family. In the end, all self-centeredness no matter what it is eventually leaves us as slaves to our own desires, imprisoned in ourselves and unable to form true relationships with others.

Instead, Jesus invites us to a freedom that comes from taking His yoke upon our shoulders and making ourselves meek and humble of heart. We are humble when we recognize that the world does not revolve around us and accept the laws of morality as a guide for how to exist in human relationships. We are humble when we recognize that every good gift which we have has been given to us by God. As Paul says to the Corinthians, “name something that you have which you have not received.” Humility, in turn, frees us to become meek of heart. We are meek when we are able to put the good of others before our own... when we are willing to

sacrifice of ourselves and what we want for the good of others. We can only become meek and humble of heart through God's grace when we choose to live according to His will and not our own, joyfully sharing our gifts with those around us.

Without the grace of being meek and humble of heart, we will never be able to reach beyond ourselves and our own selfish desires to be united with those around us in love. This will be the most difficult battle we face in our own lives, not a battle between nations, but the battle to overcome our own selfishness and self-centeredness through God's grace. But it is only through this battle to take on Christ's yoke that we will discover true freedom... not a freedom from morality that leads us into loneliness and isolation but instead a freedom for others that comes when we make ourselves meek and humble of heart. In the end, this is the only thing that will make us truly happy because it frees us to be united to others around us in love.

Today, we are being invited to pause and embrace a new idea of freedom, a freedom that comes when take on Jesus' yoke and become meek and humble of heart so that we might be free to give ourselves more fully to others. In so doing, we will receive that which we truly desire most which is true happiness that comes when we are set free from every chain of sin that binds us so that we might enter into real relationships of love. This type of freedom cannot be won by strength of arms but by the strength of God as we embrace his yoke and freely lay down our lives for others so that we might all one day dwell together forever in peace and prosperity.