

**JULY 3, 2011: FOURTEENTH SUNDAY OF THE YEAR**  
**Zechariah 9:9-10    Romans 8:9,11-13    Matthew 11:25-30**

Back in the 70s, Scripture scholars began to speak of "trajectories" through faith: ideas, thoughts, movements that never seem to win over the majority, but eventually help some people of faith shift the way their faith affects their everyday lives. We find some of these trajectories in today's three readings.

Zechariah, for instance, certainly isn't in the mainstream of 6<sup>th</sup> century BCE Jewish thought when he shares his dream of a future Jewish king who'll come into power "... meek and riding on an ass ... He shall banish the chariot from Ephraim, and the horse from Jerusalem; the warrior's bow shall be banished, and he shall proclaim peace to the nations." (Remind you of Palm Sunday?)

All Israelites wanted peace. They longed to live tranquil lives. But they presumed this change could only happen in one of two ways. Either they would conquer all the warring nations around them, or those nations would eventually give up warring. One would have officially been classified as crazy if he or she, like Zechariah, thought the peace process would begin by Israel disarming unilaterally!

The prophet's words echo through Jesus' famous invitation, "Come to me, all 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, my burden light."

Matthew's Jesus presumes few people actually fit the category of "meek and humble of heart." That's why he begins his pericope by conceding the Father has "... hidden these things from the wise and learned (and) revealed them to the little ones."

My old biblical archeology prof Robert North adamantly held the opinion that the historical Jesus never intended his followers to be more than a small minority in the communities in which they found themselves. "It's a rare person," the Jesuit scholar reasoned, "actually willing to carry out Jesus' teachings. The lukewarm majority are never going to change anything." For North, Jesus' little ones are few and far between. Most who claim to be followers of Jesus are content just to tread water.

Though Paul never gets involved in numbers or percentages, he presumes those who are determined to follow Jesus' trajectory are exceptional individuals. He reminds the Christian community in Rome, "You are not in the flesh; on the contrary, you are in the spirit, if only the Spirit of God dwells in YOU . . . We are not debtors to the flesh, to live according to the flesh. For if you live according to the flesh you will die, but if by the Spirit you put to death the deeds of the body, you will live."

Yet, no matter how "spirited" we are, we still live our lives "in the flesh." We can't escape being human.

One of the key aspects of Teilhard de Chardin's belief in Jesus' eventual Second Coming is that each of us, by the way we live our lives, has an obligation to help make that event a reality. We're not going to be in the audience, applauding the show when the Parousia arrives. According to Teilhard, we're going to be up on the stage, part of the "show." Jesus won't come without our participation.

Trajectories in faith are essential if our faith is ever going to change our world. But if we're waiting for huge numbers of people to agree and join us in latching on to those trajectories, we're going to be waiting for a long time. Jesus once reminded us, "You build the monuments to the prophets your ancestors killed!"

It takes generations before the exceptional become the norm. If a few exceptional people don't risk taking a ride on those faith trajectories, we'll always be stuck "in the flesh." We'll never leave this world.

Roger Vermalen Karban

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## **JULY 10, 2011: FIFTEENTH SUNDAY OF THE YEAR**

**Isaiah 55:10-11    Romans 8:18-23    Matthew 13:1-23**

The closer I come to dying, the more today's lines from Isaiah 55 become significant in my life. "Thus says Yahweh: Just as from the heavens the rain and snow come down and do not return there until they have watered the earth, making it fertile and fruitful — So shall my word be that goes forth from my mouth; my word shall not return to me void, but shall do my will, achieving the end for which I sent it."

No one can stop rain and snow from having an effect on this planet; so no one can stop God's word from having an effect in our lives of faith. It's no accident that these words were proclaimed by one of the greatest of all prophets: Deutero-Isaiah. As I once mentioned in a pamphlet about him, "He's the person who changed our faith." We've never believed quite the same way since he came on the scene 2,500 years ago during the Babylonian Exile. Judaism as an institution was on the ropes, basic practices like sacrificial worship were impossible to perform, and worst of all, Yahweh was regarded as inferior to Marduk since his people, the Babylonians, had defeated Yahweh's people in battle.

The prophet had no choice but to fall back on Yahweh's word. It was the only thing the people hadn't lost; it alone gave him hope that the exile would eventually end. Though God's word is easy to ignore, it's the most powerful force our faith has to offer. Yet it would also cost Deutero-Isaiah his life. His martyrdom seems to be one of the reasons his disciples inserted today's oracle in the very last chapter of his work. By doing so, they assured his community that he died convinced the word would bring about the dream it proclaimed.

Paul, who expressly identifies with this unnamed prophet, shows how their experiences parallel. He points out to the Roman church that things and people didn't instantly change when he preached God's word in Jesus. He had a tough row to hoe. "I consider that the sufferings of this present time are as nothing compared with the glory to be revealed for us . . . . All creation is groaning in labor pains even until now; and not only that, but we ourselves . . . groan within ourselves as we wait for adoption, the redemption of our bodies." No one is conceived, then immediately born. And no birth takes place without pain.

If the historical Jesus didn't identify with Deutero-Isaiah, his first followers made the connection for him. Here Matthew's Jesus shows he shares his prophetic predecessor's frame of mind. (This is one of those rare occasions when I encourage you not to read the whole liturgical selection. Proclaim only the first 9 verses. The remainder is an early Christian allegory having little to do with Jesus' original parable.)

One problem we encounter when dealing with Jesus' parables is that these stories only make sense if we're privy to what was said immediately before he delivers the parable. Scholars generally agree that in today's situation someone walked up to Jesus and said, "You're wasting your time! A month from now over half your crowd won't remember even one thing you said; a year from now only one or two will have changed anything in their lives because of what you said."

It was then that Jesus points to a farmer broadcasting seed and reminds his well-meaning friend that if just a little bit of seed takes root it'll produce "fruit, a hundred, or sixty or thirty fold." If just one or two people change their lives because of the word he's preaching, it'll make all his wasted effort worthwhile.

Jesus, like Deutero-Isaiah and Paul, was amazed at the power of the word he proclaimed. Ministering in a world like theirs, where few seem concerned with that word, it certainly makes me personally feel a lot better about dying.

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