

Fourteenth Sunday *per annum*

Year A, 2026

Zech 9:9-10

Rom 8:9, 11-13

Ps 145

Mt 11:25-30

The easy sayings of Jesus: a homiletic challenge

Many of you have heard me say in the past how the hard sayings of Jesus inspire me. They challenge me in my complacency. They make me rethink things, reevaluate my lazy presuppositions. The hard sayings of Jesus are for me vehicles of *metanoia*. As I wrestle with the words of everlasting life (Jn 6:68), repentance begins to soften my heart and I am renewed in the spirit of my mind (Eph 4:23). I experience conversion (cf Mt 13:15; Mk 4:12; Acts 3:19), meaning, I forsake my own wisdom, which is foolishness, in favor of the wisdom of God. I leave off my own understanding, which is ignorance, in favor of following and living in accordance with the commandments of God. I renounce my way in order to conform to, to cleave to the One who is the Way, and the Truth, and the Life.

I admit that because the hard sayings of Jesus engage me more than the “easy” sayings of Jesus, I find the hard sayings easier to preach on. They seem to focus my thoughts more, and I can more easily form a coherent message around them, even if that message is challenging for me to speak and challenging for you to hear.

But when the Church gives us readings like today’s, I can be at a loss as to what exactly to preach on. And that’s what happened to me all week, as I read and reread today’s readings. Nothing was coming to mind, nothing was really engaging my heart. My homily prep this

week was a real struggle. I suppose I could have been tempted to use AI to draft a homily, but I wasn't. I've played with AI writing a little. It falls flat. It isn't reflective of my thoughts, my heart, my prayer, my voice. And it hardly seems authentic to let a computer craft a form of communication as intimate as a homily, which is a father sharing the fruits of his prayerful thought or his thoughtful prayer with those who have become his spiritual family.

I put a lot of work into my homilies. I do this first for the Lord, so as to make a return to him for all the good he has done for me (Ps 116:12). I do this because to whom much is given, much will be expected (Lk 12:48). I do this because authentic preaching must be grounded in the Scriptures, with the prophets and Jesus for models, and such preaching must be Catholic, coherent, convicted, convincing, challenging, encouraging, and comforting. I do this also for you, to proclaim the Word of God to you, who are destinaries of the Word. The Word of God is addressed to you. It is your inheritance. It belongs to you. And you belong to Christ (Mk 9:41; Rom 1:6; 1 Cor 3:23). And as one to whom your spiritual care has been entrusted, I know and deeply feel that it is my solemn duty as a pastor to *"proclaim the word; [to] be persistent whether it is convenient or inconvenient; [to] convince, reprimand, encourage through all patience and teaching"* as Paul exhorted the young bishop Timothy (2 Tim 4:2).

These thoughts of mine about struggling with my homily this week were in part inspired by the occasion of my nineteenth ordination anniversary, which was this past Tuesday, June 30. As I now begin

my twentieth year of priesthood, it does me well to reflect critically on my dedication to and zeal for the things of God, so that my next twenty years (please God) may bring about in me a greater conformity to the mind of Christ and to the heart of the living God, whom I wish to serve with ever greater fidelity and effectiveness.

Anyway, the thought then came to me to offer you, as a homily, a few incomplete thoughts on the scripture readings, giving you an insight into something like the prayerful brainstorming I do when I prepare to preach. I remain unsatisfied with this effort and approach, but I know the power of the Holy Spirit to do great things with meager means we offer.

So from the first reading from the prophet Zechariah: *“your king shall come to you; a just savior is he, meek, and riding on an ass, on a colt, the foal of an ass.”* This is no terrible warrior king, but one who is humble, meek, and just. He comes to his people not on a warhorse, but on a donkey – this image mocks the supposed might of warriors and the warrior ethos. In fact, this king – no warrior – *banishes* the weapons of war, *the chariot, the warrior’s bow*. He neither incites nor declares war. He *proclaims peace*. He enters Zion, Jerusalem, that is, the place where God’s name abides, symbolic of the heart of his people Israel, and then turns to face the nations of the world. And to them, to the non-Israelites, the gentiles, he proclaims peace. Peace from Zion, from the hearts of those he has redeemed.

From the responsorial psalm, which reflects the themes found in the reading that precedes it, I am drawn immediately to the second stanza: *“The LORD is gracious and merciful, slow to anger and of great kindness. The LORD is good to all and compassionate toward all his works.”* I recall my homily from three weeks ago, on compassion, where we explored how God, in the book of Exodus, revealed himself to his people as a God of compassion – *“The LORD, the LORD, a merciful and gracious God, slow to anger and rich in kindness and fidelity”* (Ex 34:6) – words that are now quoted in Psalm 145. War brings only suffering, even in victory. The king in Zechariah’s prophecy is compassionate toward the suffering of all peoples, and so he proclaims peace. The prince of peace (Is 9:5-6), his name is worthy of praise, and to him belongs *dominion*, as Zechariah foretold, dominion over every land and nation, over every human heart.

From the second reading, from Paul’s letter to the Romans, we read how the spirit and the flesh are opposed to each other, the flesh in Paul’s thought representing the principle of corruption, sin, death, the spirit representing holiness of life in God. In this world, we are in constant tension between the two: the flesh, which brings death, and the Spirit which gives life. We see this dynamic at work in Christ – quoting 1 Peter 3:18: *“Put to death in the flesh, [Christ] was brought to life in the spirit.”* But with an authoritative word, Paul reminds us, who are in Christ Jesus: *“you are not in the flesh.”* No, we are in the Spirit, and so must live by the Spirit, perform the works of the Spirit, and so inherit life in the Spirit.

From the gospel, which reflects and completes the prophecy foretold in the first reading, we hear the words of the one who entered Jerusalem riding on a donkey (Mt 21:5), as the crowds shouted "*Hosanna*," a word of joyful praise begging for deliverance: "*Come to me,*" he says, "*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.*" Labor and burden give way to rest. Just as God worked for six days and rested on the seventh, so Jesus invites us who toil and labor to find rest in him. Rest is here synonymous with peace. Banished are the weapons of war; there will be peace. Banished are weariness and toil; there will be rest. Jesus is both our rest and our peace.

Earlier, though, Jesus spoke about the "*little ones*," and how it pleases the heavenly Father to reveal to them the things hidden from the "*wise and the learned*" of the world. St Paul would later echo this same sentiment, based on what was revealed to him in his encounter with the risen Jesus. In his first letter to the Corinthians, Paul writes "*God chose the foolish of the world to shame the wise, and God chose the weak of the world to shame the strong, and God chose the lowly and despised of the world, those who count for nothing, to reduce to nothing those who are something*" (1:27-28). Here we see the divine logic at work, which turns worldly categories on their heads: the first will be last and the last first (Mt 19:30, 20:16); the mighty are cast down and the lowly are lifted up (Lk 1:52); the hungry are fed while the

filled suffer want; those who laugh will grieve and weep (Lk 6:24ff), while the sorrowful will be consoled (Mt 5:4).

The “*little ones*,” then, are not merely children, but the poor and dispossessed, the sick and the suffering, the lonely, the last, the hungry, the weary, the forgotten. They will be given to understand things that the powerful and well-positioned, for all their prestige, cannot or will not understand.

“*All things*,” Jesus says, “*my Father has handed over to me*.” And now he promises “*all things*” – which is synonymous with the “*dominion*” spoken of by the prophet Zechariah in our first reading (cf Is 9:5-6). Again, St Paul expounds on this theme, addressing himself to those who lacked wisdom, power, and prestige in the eyes of the world (1 Cor 1:26-29): “*So let no one boast about human beings, for everything belongs to you, Paul or Apollos or Cephas, or the world or life or death, or the present or the future: all belong to you, and you to Christ, and Christ to God*” (1 Cor 3:21-23). Better, then to be a little one who receives than a big one who takes, “*for the kingdom of God belongs to such as these*” (Mk 10:14; Lk 18:16; Mt 19:14).

There they are, a few thoughts that caught my attention, offered to you for your consideration. May the Spirit be a work within you to make the Word of God come alive to you, so that “*the peace of God that surpasses all understanding [may] keep your hearts and mind in Christ Jesus*” (Phil 4:7), “*to whom belong glory and dominion forever and ever. Amen*” (1 Pt 4:11).