

4th Sunday.08

Our first reading for today is from the prophet Zephania. Scripture scholars tell us that he lived in the 600 BC. By that time the northern kingdom of Israel had lost its independence to the Assyrians, but the little southern kingdom of Judah, where Zephaniah lived, was still independent. But because of the evil ways of the people Zephaniah believed that it too would soon go under. However, he urged people to reform and he felt that a certain small number of people would do so. Those who did so, he believed, would survive the day of reckoning, the day of judgment, that was coming. They would be the humble ones among the people who had sought justice and humility. They would be the remnant whom God would preserve. In short, Zephaniah is preaching a well-known message: the good will prevail; the evil will be punished. And the good in his eyes were those who were humble and lowly. By that he meant the people who were humble enough to submit themselves to God's will by living justly.

Those who put together our readings have chosen to link this passage from Zephaniah with a section from Paul's letter to the Corinthians in which he reminds them that they are not the powerful of the world. No, Paul reminds them. God has instead

chosen the little ones of the world to confound the strong and powerful. I suppose if we were to paraphrase Paul in our language, we would say that he is telling the Corinthians that they were not the beautiful people of society. But however we phrase it, we understand what his point is. He is telling them not to be proud because whatever they have in their new faith is due to God's choice and not to their worldly status. Why has God worked in this way, Paul asks? His answer is so that it may be clear that it is his power that is at work in these people and not their own resources, so that no human being might boast before God.

These two readings from Zephanaia and Paul are now joined to the Lord's sermon on the mount as it is found in Matthew. But I suspect that my description of the linking of these three readings is wrong. I suspect that the Gospel was chosen first. Then the other two readings were joined to it.

When we look at all three together, what do we see? An emphasis on lowliness and humility, I think. That theme has been coming up lately in our readings. For example, a few weeks ago the Scriptures portrayed John humbling himself before the Lord. He is the bridegroom, John says in the 4th Gospel, I am just the best man.

On the news the other night there was talk about the crisis that people in their forties go through. People in their twenties and thirties are upbeat. The world is still opening for them. But by the time people reach their forties, they begin to see their limitations more clearly. They are not going to be all that they thought they were going to be when they were in their twenties and thirties. And so they become depressed. Then in the fifties they begin to reconcile themselves to the actual lives they have to lead. Or so the popular wisdom today goes.

From a Christian point of view couldn't we describe this natural process as God's way of teaching us through the limitations of our lives to look beyond ourselves for strength? Or could we not say, more dramatically, that God empties us little by little of our illusions. In the book published about Mother Teresa we learn that God emptied her by depriving her of a sense of his presence. She looked for Jesus but could not find him. At least that was the case for almost a half century when it came to praying. But she could always find him in the poor to whom she gave herself in service. She was astonished by this emptiness, but her spiritual fathers were able to tell her that so it has been with many saints. God empties them of themselves by depriving them of a sense of his presence in their prayers. Mother Teresa was kept humble by God in this way.

Maybe if God hadn't done that, she might have gotten a big head with all the praise and attention she received from the world. But it all meant nothing to her. Indeed it pained her. She wanted to be empty for the Lord.

We too should try to see that in and through the sufferings and disappointments of our lives God is teaching us to be humble. God is emptying us. God makes us seek our strength in Him and not in ourselves. In this way we become part of the remnant which Zephaniah talked about. We learn the lesson that Paul tried to teach the Corinthians. We begin to identify with the people whom the Lord Jesus calls blessed.