

# 14th Sunday in Ordinary Time

(Year A)

<i>First Reading</i>	Zechariah 9:9-10
<i>Response</i>	I will praise your name for ever, my king and my God.
<i>Psalm</i>	Psalm 145:1-2, 8-9, 10-11, 13-14
<i>Second Reading</i>	Romans 8:9, 11-13
<i>Gospel Acclamation</i>	Blessed are you, Father, Lord of heaven and earth; you have revealed to little ones the mysteries of the kingdom.
<i>Gospel</i>	Matthew 11:25-30

The 14th Sunday in Ordinary Time continues our journey through the Gospel of Matthew. In this week's readings we move out of Jesus's discourse on the missionary activity of the disciples — that we spent three Sundays looking at — and we move into a kind of isolated saying of Jesus; one of his teachings about himself, his relationship with the Father, and also the nature of his own teaching to the disciples. This passage is from Matthew 11:25-30. It is a very famous part of Matthew's Gospel, it's probably the most explicit teaching of Jesus in the entire Gospel about the mystery of his divine sonship, of his relationship with the Father; and it is also a very famous teaching about the yoke of Jesus, where he talks about taking on the yoke of his teaching and his yoke being easy and light, rather than burdensome. So let's look at these two kind of related sayings together and we will try to unpack them in light of both the Old Testament reading, but also the teaching and the tradition of the Church. So verse 25 of Chapter 11 in Matthew's Gospel begins as follows:

At that time Jesus declared, "I thank thee, Father, Lord of heaven and earth, that thou hast hidden these things from the wise and understanding and revealed them to babes; yea, Father, for such was thy gracious will. All things have been delivered to me by my Father; and no one knows the Son except the Father, and no one knows the Father except the Son and any one to whom the Son chooses to reveal him.

Come to me, all who labor and are heavy laden, and I will give you rest.

Take my yoke upon you, and learn from me; for I am gentle and lowly in heart, and you will find rest for your souls. For my yoke is easy, and my burden is light."<sup>1</sup>

Okay there, so what is Jesus talking about in these verses? They are kind of mysterious. They are a bit cryptic, so let's try to unpack them. The first part of this teaching is known as Jesus' Thanksgiving Prayer. We don't get very many examples of Jesus speaking directly to the Father in prayer in the Gospels. I mean think about it for a second, Jesus gives us the Lord's Prayer, but that's him teaching his disciples how to pray, we never see Jesus praying the Lord's Prayer. Where do we see him praying? Well we see him praying in the Garden of Gethsemane in the Gospel of Matthew, Mark and Luke; we see him praying to the Father in his high priestly prayer in John 17; but we don't often get glimpses into Jesus's prayer life, so to speak. So in this case, we have what is called the Thanksgiving Prayer, where Jesus cries out in a prayer of thanksgiving and joy that God has done something. It is an interesting prayer, he says "I thank you, Father, Lord of heaven and earth, that you have hidden these things from the wise and revealed them to babes" — or to infants might be a better translation today. So what is he talking about? The context of this saying is immediately after Jesus has visited the Galilean cities of Chorazin and Bethsaida and they have rejected him, they have rejected the Gospel. So he's just finished rebuking them, telling them that if the mighty works done in their cities by Jesus had been done in Sodom or or in Tyre or Sidon — these were wicked Gentile cities — that they would've repented long ago in sackcloth and ashes; but these Galilean cities had not repented.

So in that context here, Jesus is offering this prayer of Thanksgiving to the Father — it's kind of paradoxical — basically as a prayer that God has hidden the truth from the wise, the learned and the proud, and revealed it to infants. In other words, he has revealed it to those who are like little children, who are humble. So the language Jesus uses here's is interesting, when he says "I thank you, Father... you've hidden these things," the Greek word there is *kruptos*, which we get the word cryptic from. So we know what that means, that there is a certain something

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<sup>1</sup> Unless otherwise indicated, all Bible citations/quotations herein are from *The Holy Bible: Revised Standard Version, Catholic Edition*. New York: National Council of Churches of Christ in the USA, 1994.

that has been covered up, and he says “I thank you that you have revealed them to infants, to little ones” and the Greek word there is *apokaluptó*, we get the word apocalypse from that, a revelation, an unveiling of some heavenly reality, some invisible reality is being unveiled, is being revealed. So what's this invisible reality that Jesus is talking about? What is this invisible reality that's being hidden from the proud and revealed to the humble? Well, it's the very next verses, the mystery of Jesus's identity. When he says “all things have been delivered to me by my Father,” and then these amazing words, “no one knows the Son except the Father, and no one knows the Father except the Son.”

So let's pause there for a second, what does that mean? In context, think about what Jesus is saying there, “no one knows the Son except the Father.” If you look at Jesus' public ministry, one of the most interesting things about his ministry, one of the most curious things about his ministry, is that people have all kinds of opinions about who he is. Some say he's John the Baptist, some say he's Elijah, others say he's one of the prophets; but they all keep missing the mark, they don't really grasp the true mystery of who he is. Who is he in his deepest essence? Who is he as a person? He is the eternal Son of the Father, he's the divine Son of God. He is not just the Messiah, he is not just the new Moses, he is not just the new Solomon, he is the eternal and preexistent divine Son of the Father. So it's the mystery of his divinity, and what Jesus is saying here is no one knows that, really knows that, except for the Father.

And then the flip side of that is “no one knows who the Father is except for the Son.” That's a pretty radical statement too, think about it for a second, you could ask “how can Jesus say that?” You have the whole Old Testament, you have all of the Jewish scriptures here, that have been a revelation of God to his people. Wouldn't you think that the Jewish Scriptures, the Old Testament, revealed God as a Father? On certain occasions God is compared to a father in the Old Testament, like in the book of Deuteronomy, or in the book of Sirach, we see images that compare God to a father. Jesus here is saying something deeper. He's not saying that God is just like a father, he's saying that in his deepest mystery, the first person — what we call the first person of the Trinity — is eternally the Father of the eternal Son. In other words, God isn't just creator, he isn't just judge, he isn't just Lord; but from all eternity he is Father, who is in an eternal relationship with the divine Son. In other words, what Jesus is getting at here is no one knows the

mystery of the Trinity unless that mystery be revealed to them. So what happens is, when Jesus is being rejected by these Galilean cities, they are not just rejecting the Messiah or the king of Israel, the long-awaited king; they are rejecting this great mystery of the Trinity itself, of the divine sonship of Christ.

And if you have any doubts about that you can look at what he says there, “no one knows the Father except the Son and anyone to whom the Son chooses to reveal him. Again the Greek word there is *apokaluptó*, to unveil this mystery. It's an invisible mystery that has to be unveiled. And you can see that that is what Jesus means here if you go to another passage in the Gospel. This isn't for this Sunday, but it's something worth thinking about. You will recall the famous passage in Matthew 16:13-18, where Jesus asked the disciples “who do men say that the Son of Man is?” And the disciples say “some say John the Baptist, others say Elijah, others say one of the prophets.” Then Jesus turns to them and says “well who do you say that I am?” And Peter steps up and says “you are the Christ, the son of God.” And remember, how does Jesus respond to that confession of faith in his divine Sonship? He says to Peter, “flesh and blood has not revealed this to you [*apokaluptó*, same verb], but my Father who is in heaven.”

So let's pause there for just a second. What essentially Jesus is teaching here is what the Catechism of the Catholic Church will later go on to describe as the mystery of the Trinity. In paragraph 237 of the Catechism it says that the Church's doctrine of the Trinity is a “mystery” in the “strict sense.” In other words, it's a truth about God that we couldn't know just through our own rational power, by looking at the world and using logic and reason and philosophy. We couldn't know that God was an eternal trinity of persons unless he revealed that to us. He has to show that to us, he has to show that supernatural mystery to us. We can't grasp at it through our own power. It transcends our ability to know it unless God shows it to us, and that's what Jesus is getting at here. He is not focusing on the third person of the Trinity yet, he is not focusing on the Holy Spirit yet, he is just focusing on the mystery of his eternal Sonship and the eternal Fatherhood of God, because remember, from all eternity God is not creator, from all eternity God is not judge, those are things that God does in time, through creation, in salvation history. But from all eternity God is Father, Son and Holy Spirit, that is not just what he does, that's who he is in his deepest mystery; and that mystery is the mystery of who God is in himself, and he has to show that to us. So this passage here is really important

in the Gospel of Matthew because it is one of the key passages for the doctrine of the Trinity, which we celebrate on the Feast of the Holy Trinity.

I also bring it up because it's one of the key passages that show us that in the Gospel of Matthew, Jesus isn't just a prophet, he isn't just the Messiah, he's divine. So sometimes you will hear people say that Jesus is only divine in the Gospel of John, he is not divine in Matthew, Mark and Luke. Well that is just false, and this passage proves it, that Jesus is talking about a kind of Sonship that is eternal, that is exclusively known to the Father alone, and that is unique in its relationship with the Father. There is no other son of God like Jesus is the son of God, and no one can know that mystery until God reveals it to them. In fact, some scholars have actually called these verses the Johannine thunderbolt. In other words, these verses of Matthew's Gospel sound like they are coming from the Gospel of John, because it is so clearly a divine son of God. It is so clearly Trinitarian in its formulation. And that is the sad fact of Jesus being rejected by the Galileans, that they're really rejecting this great mystery of the Trinity that God wants to reveal to them. That he has not just sent them the Messiah, but that he has come in person as the son of God became man.

Now with that said, Jesus moves to the second part of the teaching here, which is about his yoke. And that is Y-O-K-E and not Y-O-L-K, not his yolk, but his yoke. When I was a kid I used to hear the word yoke and I thought it was like egg yolk and it didn't make any sense. You know, Jesus saying take my yolk upon you, and I was like "what is Jesus talking about eggs for?" But this is the image here of a yoke that would be used for beasts of burden when they were plowing the fields, the wooden harness that they would use to harness oxen together in order to plow the fields. And in this case, Jesus says something really remarkable. He says "come to me all you who labor and are heavy laden [or burdened], and I'm going to give you rest." So he is inviting us in to rest. Now at that point this sounds great. I don't know about you, but I am pretty tired. Especially if you are an American, we like to work and we like to work hard, and we tend to work ourselves to death. So being a heavy burden with all of our labors is a natural condition, it is something that has been a part of the human condition since the fall of Adam in Genesis 3, that fruitless toil and labor are going to be part of the lot of humanity after the fall in the Old Testament. So Jesus is speaking to everyone here. "If you're laboring and you are heavy burdened, come to me and I will give you rest."

So that sounds really good, but how do I get that rest, Jesus? Well take this giant piece of wood, this yoke, and put it on your shoulders, that's how you are going to rest with me. So this is one of those parables, one of those riddles that Jesus gives. Usually if you invite someone in to rest, you don't place a giant heavy piece of wood on their shoulders. You don't say "are you tired? Would you like to rest? Then pick up these two 50-gallon buckets of water and carry them with me. So it's a paradox, it's a mystery, this is another mystery he is giving to us here. So he says "take my yoke upon you; and learn from me..." So he is talking about his teaching here "...for I am meek [or gentle] and lowly [or humble] in heart, and that's how you will find rest for your souls. For my yoke is easy, and my burden is light." So what is Jesus doing here? Well you will see in just a couple chapters in Matthew's Gospel that Jesus taught in parables, and parables weren't just nice stories that were drawing on everyday life and making a comparison between two different things, they were also riddles. The word parable can refer to a riddle, and this is really a riddle here. Jesus is posing this riddle of the fact that if you take his yoke upon your shoulders, it's going to be a burden, but it is actually going to be light and it is going to be easy.

So what is he referring to here? Well, two things, first, you might recall from the 13th Sunday in Ordinary Time, that the last time Jesus talked about putting wood on your shoulders was when he said to "take up your cross and follow him." So on one level he's continuing the image of the cross, of bearing the cross in order to be his disciple. It is only through the cross that you'll get to the resurrection, it is only through suffering that you will learn how to love and that you'll taste the glory of the world to come. That's one dimension of the meaning. The other dimension though, and the primary one I think in context, is Jesus' way of life and not just his teaching. He is not just telling us to accept his teachings here, he is telling us to imitate him in two key ways. First, in gentleness or meekness, second, in humility. So those are the yokes of Jesus here, gentleness and humility. So this should make us think back to the 5th chapter of Matthew's Gospel, the Beatitudes, when he talks about the people who are poor in spirit. The humble, they're happy, they are going to inherit the kingdom of God. Blessed are the meek, the gentle, they are going to inherit the earth. Even though it looks like the powerful will get the earth, in fact, those who are gentle are the ones who get the earth. Those who love their enemies and turn the other cheek, that is the real power and that is the real peace that comes

from living according to the Beatitudes and living the Gospel. So Jesus is inviting the disciples to imitate him in his humility and in his gentleness, and in doing so he is actually alluding to the Old Testament — surprise, surprise, he does this all the time. But in this case it is interesting, because the illusion here is to one of the books in the Catholic Old Testament that is not in the Protestant Old Testament. In the book of Sirach 51 — this isn't quoted in the lectionary, but I thought I would give it to you here — we see the exact same imagery. In Sirach 51:26-27, Wisdom in person, the person of Wisdom, is speaking; and Wisdom says this:

Put your neck under the yoke, and let your souls receive instruction; it is to be found close by. See with your eyes that I have labored little and found myself much rest.

Notice the two images there, taking the yoke of Wisdom upon you will actually give you rest, if you learn to live according to Wisdom. So what is Jesus doing here? He's not just showing us that he is a teacher of parables, he's basically, in a sense, saying “I am wisdom in person and I am calling you to imitate me in my humility and in my gentleness, and if you do that, you are actually going to find peace, you are actually going to find rest; not for your bodies, but for your souls. You are going to find rest for your souls and you will find the joy that comes from following me.” And you might think, “how is that really possible?” Especially if you're going through life and you're experiencing just the burden of labor itself and the worries and the cares and anxieties, for example, of family life and married life, they can get really burdensome and really heavy at times.

What is Jesus talking about here? How can a yoke be light? Well, one thing that is important to remember here is that the word yoke, *zygos* here, a number of scholars have pointed this out, is that ordinarily a yoke would be carried by two animals, it would be carried by two oxen. You would harness, you would yoke, two oxen together and then they would plow the field. So what happens there is the animals, in a sense, aid one another as they carry the burden of the yoke. So one interpretation of Jesus' words here is that what he's inviting us into is not here, you take my yoke upon you, I am going to give it to and you carry it by yourself; but that I will help you shoulder the yoke. In other words, it is almost like the image of Simon of Cyrene. What does he do? He helps Jesus carry the cross. They carry the cross together to Calvary, and that's really what I think Jesus is inviting us into

here. He doesn't want to just be humble and gentle himself, he wants us to take up the yoke of humility and gentleness and he will help us to carry our burdens and to carry our crosses so that we can follow him. And when we do that, what we will discover is rest for our souls. Because the reality is that his yoke is the only yoke that is light, his is the only one that is really easy. It doesn't look easy, but the reality is that the only true yoke that is easy to carry is the one that Christ helps us to carry, because he is going to shoulder it with us. Most of us try to go through this life just carrying all of our burdens by ourselves, and that's what makes them so hard. Christ here offers to carry it with us in imitation of him.

So that is the Gospel reading, there is so much we could talk about with that. If you go back to the Old Testament reading for today, the first reading is from the book of Zechariah. It's the famous oracle of the King, the Messiah, the future King of Israel, coming to Jerusalem, riding on a donkey. So in Zechariah 9:9-10 we read:

Rejoice greatly, O daughter of Zion!  
Shout aloud, O daughter of Jerusalem!  
Lo, your king comes to you;  
triumphant and victorious is he,  
humble and riding on an ass,  
on a colt the foal of an ass.

I will cut off the chariot from E'phraim  
and the war horse from Jerusalem;  
and the battle bow shall be cut off,  
and he shall command peace to the nations;  
his dominion shall be from sea to sea,  
and from the River to the ends of the earth.

Why does the Church pick this Old Testament reading for the background to the Gospel for today? Well I think it is two key themes there, humility and peace. So the king that is prophesied is going to come, not riding on a chariot of war, but on a humble donkey. So he is going to be a humble king and he is not going to be a warrior king. He's going to be a king who cuts off the chariot, cuts off the warhorse and who brings peace to the nation. So he is going to be a humble king



and a king of peace. So that's just the background, it is a kind of anticipation of the humility of Christ that we see reflected in Jesus' famous teaching about being meek and lowly of heart, meek and humble of heart. And the Psalm kind of bridges that Old Testament passage between the old and new with a Psalm of thanksgiving and praise. "I will extol you my King and my God" is one of the refrains of that Psalm, just like Jesus says "I thank you, Father, Lord of heaven and earth, that you've hidden these things from the wise and revealed them to the infant." There is, again, a paradox there. You would think that it is surely the smartest people, the wisest people, the most intelligent people who are going to be the ones who understand the Gospel, they are going to be the ones who understand the Scriptures, they are going to see the connection between the old and new, they are going to see the prophecies fulfilled. No, actually no, they are not the ones. They are going to be blind to it and it is going to be the little people, it's going to be the humble people, it is going to be some fisherman from Galilee and a no-good tax collector like Matthew who are going to be brought into the mystery of the Kingdom. Not because they are greater or smart or brilliant, but because they are humble and because they're willing choose Christ, to take up the yoke of Jesus and to walk with him in humility all the way to Calvary.

Okay, some final reflections then on what this passage might mean for us in the tradition of the Church. There is a very ancient commentary on the Gospel of Matthew. It is an incomplete commentary, so the whole book is not preserved for us, we only have parts of it. So scholars have given it the very creative name, *Incomplete Work on Matthew*. It is an anonymous commentary so we don't know who wrote it, but it exercised a lot of influence in the history of the Church because it really is a very insightful commentary on the Gospel of Matthew. In that ancient commentary on Matthew we read these words about the Gospel for today, just listen to this for a minute and reflect on it:

My yoke is easy and my burden light..." The prophet says this about the burden of sinners: "Because my iniquities lie on top of my head, so they have also placed a heavy burden on me" (Ps 37:4 LXX). "Place my yoke upon you, and learn from me that I am gentle and humble of heart." Oh, what a very pleasing weight that strengthens even more those who carry it! For the weight of earthly masters gradually destroys the strength of their

servants, but the weight of Christ rather helps the one who bears it, because we do not bear grace; grace bears us.<sup>2</sup>

So what is that commentary showing us? It's basically saying this, that the truly heavy burdens are not just the burdens of labor and work in this world; the heaviest burden of all is sin. Sin turns us into slaves. Sin is a burden, it is like a weight around our neck that drags us down, and the more and more we sin, the heavier the weight becomes. And so what Jesus is really calling us to here is to take up the burden and the weight of the cross, the yoke of the cross, by which he destroyed sin, and what we will find is that when we take up the burden of the cross and put down the burden of our sin, we actually can live in the freedom and the ease of the children of God. It doesn't mean we are not going to suffer, but it does mean that we are going to carry a weight that paradoxically is actually light, because we don't carry it by ourself. Jesus doesn't ask his followers to carry the cross by themselves, he promises that he will be with them and he will carry them, because it's all going to be through his grace. It is not us that carries God's grace. We don't pull ourselves up to heaven by our bootstraps, but rather it's grace that carries us to the cross and then through the cross to the resurrection. So I would just encourage you as you are reflecting on Matthew's Gospel for this week, if you haven't done this already, to just reflect on what Jesus is inviting us to do. Namely this, that when we have our burdens of life, whether they be the burdens of labor and anxiety and fears and just the sufferings of ordinary life or the burdens of our sin, that all those yokes, we need to bring them to him, and give them to Christ, and let him give us the yoke of his grace and the yoke of the cross, so that he can carry us with him to Calvary and on to the resurrection.

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<sup>2</sup> *Incomplete Work on Matthew*, Homily 29; trans. M. Simonetti, Matthew, 1.233