

Homily for July 3, 2005
14th Sunday in Ordinary Time (A)

By Father Charles Bowes

Zechariah 9:9-10
Psalm 145:1-2, 8-11, 13-14
Romans 8:9, 11-13
Matthew 11:25-30

We are of infinite worth, and for this we give praise to God.

"You are not in the flesh," says St. Paul in Romans chapter 8. "On the contrary, you are in the spirit."

This talk in Saint Paul about flesh and spirit and the thought that flesh is somehow to be done away with or unworthy has long bothered me. It just runs counter to my reality. I am body and soul, not just soul. I've recently found some helpful exegesis of this material that clarifies what St. Paul is saying and gives a breath of fresh air to our bodiliness.

In his Letter to the Romans, chapter 8, Saint Paul speaks of the division between flesh and spirit. Saint Paul and his Jewish contemporaries believed that sin itself resided in the flesh. This is why Jews required two burials for their dead. The initial burial lasted for one year, until all the flesh had decayed and decomposed from the body. The second burial occurred when one's bones were gathered and placed in an ossuary (bones without flesh) by the family members. It is in the second burial that the Spirit is ready for the general resurrection of the dead at the end of time.

Through Jesus' own life, death and resurrection, Saint Paul believed that Christians can already - in this lifetime - be ready for the resurrection. Jesus took on the death of us all. He lived in the flesh and

transformed that flesh by the way he lived: faithful to the calling the Father gave him.

So, in effect, Jesus put death to death in his own flesh. His resurrection is evidence of that. It wasn't a year later until after he had rotted. No, it was, in St. John's gospel, instantly. No longer do we "wait" for some future transformation. Already, now, today we live in the Spirit, that new life. Those who dwell in the Spirit of Christ die in the flesh already and live in the Spirit. No wonder Saint Paul was so excited. It changed his whole approach to his own flesh and blood.

This insight erases a disparaging attitude toward one's own body and enables us to read Saint Paul with better understanding of how and why he would make such a big deal of flesh and spirit. Our flesh is not a distraction but a vehicle, an agent of the transformation that begins even now...since through faith and baptism we are swallowed up in the Lord Jesus' transformation. So when we talk of the Incarnation, the enfleshment of Jesus, we're talking about that dignity, that eternal worth of the human and of our body. We're not vessels of sin but, as the poet wrote, "Immortal diamonds" in our whole person.

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and for this we give praise to God.*