

Year C Twenty-Second Sunday in Ordinary Time

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The theme of the first reading and of the gospel is “humility.” We all may have “common sense” notions of humility, but in these columns I have tried to convey how the Bible, God’s inspired Word, presents things: usually, what we have in our heads is only the tip of the iceberg, and delving into the biblical world opens up a profound, interconnected series of underground streams which can take us far into God’s revelation. In fact, Vatican II’s Constitution on Divine Revelation speaks of God’s revelation (which comes to us from Sacred Scripture and Sacred Tradition) as “flowing from the same divine wellspring” (no. 9).

One of the most certain things we know Jesus said was that ‘whoever humbles himself will be lifted up’ (I much prefer this translation here than translating ‘exalted’, as we shall see). The word “humble,” and the verb “to be humbled,” are very important in the Bible. In Hebrew, the root meaning is to be “bowed down,” like ‘stooped to the ground’, so that it corresponds well to “humble,” which comes from Latin words meaning ‘not far from the ground’. From this root meaning comes the spiritual or ethical meaning: in the Bible, the word “humble” in the sense of “meek” is applied to Moses (the ‘meekest man on the earth’, Nm 12:3); it is also applied to the humble king on a donkey who will enter Jerusalem in Zec 9:9. With the meaning “afflicted” it is used for fasting on the day of Atonement in Lv 16:29; with the meaning “oppressed” it is used of the ‘Suffering Servant’ in Ps 22:25 and Is 53:7. This is what Jesus meant when he said he was ‘meek and humble of heart’ in Mt 11:29. This ‘humility’ here is the same as what Mary says of herself in the Magnificat, except there we usually translate “lowly, lowliness,” but in Greek it is the same root (Lk 1:48, 52; and Sir 3:20 in our first reading). This is also what Paul says about Jesus in Phil 2:8, again using the same root: Christ “lowered himself” to the low point of death on a cross.

I said that it is certain that Jesus said that ‘whoever lowers himself shall be lifted up.’ Jesus spoke in Aramaic, and in that language “to be lifted up” has a double-meaning: it means both to be “exalted” and “to be crucified.” Jesus said several times that the Son of man ‘must be lifted up’, like Moses lifted up the serpent in the desert, Jn 3:14; when Jesus is lifted up, he will

be revealed as “I Am,” God’s Name in Ex 3:14 (Jn 8:28). Finally, in Jn 12:32-33 we learn explicitly that ‘being lifted up’ is a reference to Jesus’ manner of death, on the cross. It was such “humility” which resulted in the great exaltation of Jesus, as Paul says in Phil 2:9.