

Year A Fourth Sunday in Ordinary Time (Feb. 3, 2008)

Zep 2:3; 3:12-13; Ps 146; 1 Cor 1:26-31; Mt 5:1-12a

The theme of today's readings is humility. The prophet Zephaniah lived around 640 B.C.E., in a time of religious and political corruption (that is, before the time of the great reformer king Josiah). The mighty Assyrian empire made its influence felt in Judah, and the elites especially imitated its idolatrous ways. If ever there was a prophet who hated arrogance and praised humility, it was Zephaniah: he chastises the rich (1:18), corrupt leaders (3:1-4), and the 'happily haughty' (3:11). God is so angry with all these that he threatens "uncreation," 1:2-3. The gloominess of this prophet, who keenly felt what many did not, led to words (1:2-18) which gave us the famous medieval funeral dirge known as the *Dies irae*, "Day of Wrath." And also the Hebrew word for the Nazi Holocaust, *shoah*, 1:15 (often translated "ruin" or "devastation").

On the other hand, the ones dear to the Lord, who will survive his horrible judgment —and they will be only a remnant— are the "humble," in Hebrew, the '*anawim*. They are poor (Hebrew *dal*, 3:12, in our reading "lowly," which could just as well translate '*anawim*). This is a most important concept. The '*anaw*, singular of '*anawim*, describes Moses in Num 12:3 (in Greek, *praus*, "meek, mild"). These terms are applied to the messianic king who enters Jerusalem on a donkey, Zech 9:9, and Jesus uses them to describe himself in Mt 11:29, along with another Greek rendering of "lowly" (*tapeinos*) which also appears on Our Lady's lips in the Magnificat, Lk 1:48, 52. This is the famous term applied to Jesus' humbling himself, taking the form of a slave, in Phil 2:8.

With this in mind, we can better understand the other readings. The '*anawim* spirituality of humility and meekness and, yes, even material, real poverty as practised "without interpretation" by most if not all saints, became dominant in the Jewish Second Temple period (520 B.C.E.-70 C.E.). This is most strongly reflected in the at times harsh Letter of James (1:9; 4:6). The '*anaw*, the "humble" or "lowly" one, who "afflicted" him or herself (with fasting, among other things, see e.g. Lev 16:29), counted only on the Lord, and had stopped putting his trust on human might. This is what is behind the Beatitudes in Matthew, and is obviously quite contrary to our society's standards.