

COMMENTARY ON READINGS FOR SUNDAY, JAN. 30, 2005
(4th Sunday in Ordinary Time)
(Zeph 2:3; 3:12-13; Ps 146; 1 Cor 1:26-31; Matt 5:1-12a)

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This Sunday's readings describe the authentic people of God, the kind of person who pleases God and who will be saved by him. These are the people over whom God really reigns, that is, the true members of the Kingdom of God. They are set over against others who do not submit to God.

The first reading is from Zephaniah, a prophet who lambasted the arrogant of his day (seventh century B.C.E.), Zeph 3:11. Zephaniah announces a great day of judgment, described in such terrible terms, Zeph 1:14-18, that the medieval funeral hymn *Dies irae* ("Day of Wrath"), used for requiem Masses, is based on it; in v. 15 we find the word *shoah*, used for the Nazi Holocaust. But after the terrible purification of the people that would take place, a holy remnant would be left. This remnant is described in the first reading. They are called the "humble," in Hebrew, *'anawim*, meaning "bowed down, afflicted, humbled" ("humble" comes from the Latin *humus*, the ground). This type of people are associated in Judaism with fasting and penance, waiting for the Lord. They are "meek," as Moses is described (with the same word) in Num 12:3. In the New Testament, Jesus is so described with the equivalent word in Greek, Matt 11:29; Phil 2:8, as is Mary, Luke 1:48; most translations render it as "lowliness." These are the people that will survive God's judgment, according to Zephaniah.

In the Sermon on the Mount, Jesus describes the same kind of people with various expressions. He pronounces them all "happy," "blessed," using the word found at the very beginning of the first Psalm. It is almost like a celebratory hymn to "the poor in spirit," and the "gentle" (using the other word of the pair in Matt 11:29). They are not content now, but cry over the state of the world, in which they suffer most of all (compare Luke's version in Luke 6:20-26). They are persecuted "for righteousness' sake," and are peacemakers, are insulted and falsely accused. They would seem to be a "remnant," a small group, as in the prophet Zephaniah.