

The Humble Servant

Homily for January 28-29th 2023

More than a century ago a proud university student boarded a train in France and sat next to an older man who seemed to be a peasant of comfortable means. The brash student noticed that the older gentleman was slipping beads through his fingers. He was praying the rosary.

"Sir, do you still believe in such outdated things?" the student inquired.

"Yes, I do. Don't you?" the man responded. The student laughed and admitted, "I do not believe in such silly things. Take my advice. Throw the rosary out the window and learn what science has to say about it."

"Science? I do not understand this science. Perhaps you can explain it to me," the man said humbly, tears welling in his eyes.

The university student noticed that the man was deeply moved. To avoid hurting further the older person's feelings, he said, "Please give me your address and I will send you some literature to explain the matter to you." The man fumbled in the inside pocket of his coat and pulled out his business card. On reading the card, the student lowered his head in shame and was speechless. The card read: "Louis Pasteur, Director of the Institute of Scientific Research, Paris." The proud science student encountered his country's leading chemist and bacteriologist, a man of humility with a servant's heart.

Today we are having the second in the series of homilies on how the Church shares in the ministry of Jesus as Prophet, Priest, and King. These correspond to the ministry of teaching and evangelization – Jesus' prophetic vocation; the ministry of Worship – Jesus' priestly vocation and the ministry of service – Jesus' kingly vocation. We considered worship two weeks ago and will consider the prophetic ministry of the Church two weeks from today.

Therefore, today we will focus on the ministry of service, and how service is joined to the virtue of humility. From the story of Louis Pasteur think of how he humbly served following in the example of Jesus and had such a lasting influence on the world. The milk we drink today is pasteurized, because he discovered how to make this product safer to consume.

As we consider this theme of humility joined to service I am going to concentrate on the readings from the Old Testament, Zephaniah, and the Psalm.

The reading from Zephaniah gives us a picture of the humble person and the psalm is a clear expression of what it means to serve like Jesus.

In the reading from Zephaniah, we heard of a remnant community. What does this word mean? It is always a small community of those who like Louis Pasteur will in the face the majority community that is skeptical and dismissive of people of faith choose to live as Zephaniah pictures in this reading. Listen to these verses that all focus on the virtue of humility.

***Seek the LORD, all you humble of the land,
who do his commands;
seek righteousness, seek humility;¹***

Do you here how the governing verb here is “seek.” Remember what Jesus said in Matthew’s Gospel using the same verb: “Seek first the kingdom of God.” What is the nature of that kingdom that has Jesus as our servant King? It is the kingdom governed by the virtue of humility. So, what is humility? It is choosing to think more about God and others than about oneself. Therefore, growing in humility means training ourselves to do just that, which is a life-long project. Listen to how Zephaniah describes a remnant community growing in the virtue of humility.

***For I will leave in the midst of you
a people humble and lowly.
They shall seek refuge in the name of the LORD—
¹³ the remnant of Israel;
they shall do no wrong
and utter no lies,
nor shall a deceitful tongue
be found in their mouths.
Then they will pasture and lie down,
and no one shall make them afraid.²***

Do you hear how those who are growing in the virtue of humility are living with integrity both by the way they speak and the way they live.

Let me return to the example of Louis Pasteur. School was a challenge for him, and he went to college to study science, but he struggled and dropped out. After some time, he gave College a second try but failed his final exam and did not graduate. But he was a man of deep faith and persevered. He said of himself:

Let me tell you the secret that has led me to my goal. My strength lies solely in my tenacity.

By 1847 he had earned a doctorate so that the once struggling student became a great chemistry professor who continued to trust God and was devoted to him. Louis Pasteur knew that germs and bacteria cause health problems, so he looked for ways to fight them and founded a branch of science called microbiology. As a Catholic man of faith, he used his scientific skills to serve others. Again, to quote him:

¹ [*The Holy Bible: New Revised Standard Version, Catholic Edition*](#) (Zep 2:3). (1993). National Council of Churches of Christ.

² [*The Holy Bible: New Revised Standard Version, Catholic Edition*](#) (Zep 3:12–13). (1993). National Council of Churches of Christ.

The more I study nature, the more I stand amazed at the work of the Creator. Science brings men nearer to God.

What we see in Louis Pasteur is a man whose humility allowed him to serve like Jesus, a service reflected in today's Psalm. This psalm lists ten ways in which God is the King who serves: Listen to the ten:

The Lord:

1. Keeps faith forever, that is he is loyal and true to his word.
2. He is just and cares for the oppressed.
3. He gives food to the hungry
4. He sets prisoners free.
5. He opens the eyes of the blind.
6. Lifts those who are bowed down.
7. He loves the righteous
8. Watches over strangers
9. Upholds the orphan and the widow.
10. The way of the wicked he brings to ruin.

Do you hear how the servant God embodies the humility he asks of those of us who share in the Kingly Ministry of Jesus? The first nine are all positive ways in which the Lord interacts with us and the last, the way of the wicked God's brings to ruin, speaks of those who oppose Jesus' servant rule.

We are called to share in this work of the Lord as we offer our service to him. Louis Pasteur lived out the humble servant life that is expressed in the Collect we prayed at the beginning of Mass.

Grant us Lord our God, that we may honour you with al our mind and love everyone in truth of heart.

Although our contributions will be different from those of Louis Pasteur, we can be motivated by his humble servant heart. When we do this, St Peter's can increasingly be a remnant community where we are inspired to see our Parish reflect Psalm 146 and Zephaniah.

So, I would ask you to ponder what it means to serve with humility and so extend the compassion of King Jesus.