

Fourteenth Sunday in Ordinary Time

Homily by Deacon Jim Olshefski

July 9, 2023

The unexpected. At times throughout our lives, things that we didn't anticipate, things that were unexpected, simply happen. These unexpected events can elicit joy or sorrow or anger, amazement or bewilderment or any number of emotions.

While on the pilgrimage, El Camino de Santiago, from which Mary and I just returned this past Thursday, a number of unexpected happenings occurred:

- Much to our joyful surprise, throughout Portugal we were surrounded by an abundance of beautiful flowers, particularly Hydrangeas in vivid purple, Passion flowers and Birds of Paradise. At times, we almost experienced sensory-overload from the breathtaking scenes before our eyes. Additionally, on Corpus Christi Sunday, the petals from many of these flowers were used to create exquisitely-patterned processional pathways, up to ¼-mile long, leading into the local churches. An unexpected sight to behold.
- In prior pilgrimages on the Camino, I was pretty-much the chief planner and scheduler; however, this time, another member of our small group of 6 pilgrims did all of the planning. As a result, I just experienced things as they happened, without any foreknowledge of what lay on the road ahead. Well...I, along with Mary, were taken completely by surprise when on day 6 of our pilgrimage, we found ourselves walking up—and down—over 1,300 feet on a very steep, and rocky, mountain by the name of Alto de Portela Grande! It literally took our breath away and added a multitude of aches and pains to our weary bodies. Sleep that night was a welcomed relief!
- A most welcomed but unexpected surprise occurred when we overnighted at Casa de Fernanda in Lugar do Corgo, where the charming Fernanda, and her husband, were hosts beyond compare. From when she invited—or more accurately forced—all of the pilgrims staying at her beautiful home and grounds that evening to participate in the Mass celebrated by Fr. Tony, our dear friend from Amarillo, to the scrumptious appetizers and meal that they prepared for us, to the sing-along that they orchestrated among pilgrims from many different nations, we experienced an evening that we will not soon forget.

Yes; the unexpected can bring forth a multitude of emotions.

And that is the situation in today's readings. In the first reading, the beleaguered Israelites, who were always looking for a king who would save them, are told by the prophet Zechariah to expect the unexpected, a different kind of savior. Zechariah foresees a king, meek and humble, riding on a common donkey; not a warrior king on a powerful chariot. This savior will banish weapons of war and "shall proclaim peace to the nations." The people of Israel, recently returned from exile and in-process of reconstructing the second temple in Jerusalem, are encouraged to look for the coming of the messiah, their savior, but while the prophet prophesizes the longed-for peace, he provides them with a counter-culture view of the messiah.

This message of an unexpected type of king, or savior, is reinforced by the responsorial psalm, as **we're invited into a relationship with a God who is gracious, merciful, slow to anger and kind**; a loving king who lifts-up all who are falling down and raising up all who are burdened in life.

And in the Gospel Jesus offers this invitation to those who are heavily burdened, and marginalized, by life: "Come to me, all you who labor and are burdened, and I will give you rest." Those words, I'm sure, were as welcomed by the people in Jesus' time as they are to us today. However, there's more than relief and rest to Jesus' invitation to a Christian life: Jesus continues by calling all of us to take up his yoke and continue his work of caring for those around us, offering support to the so many people in our world, those worn out under the weight of neglect and indifference. But how are we supposed to accomplish that mission when we may NOT be feeling all that strong ourselves?

At this point, it's helpful to picture a yoke, which is a harness shared by **two** animals that allows them to work together as a team. Therefore, Jesus is NOT **handing over** a burden to us; but rather, he's asking us to **join** him in his work, to share the yoke.

News in the world today may seem to be constantly negative, almost expectantly so, and can oftentimes make us feel downcast. But as followers of Jesus, we're called to a meekness and humility, not unlike the prophesized king in the first reading, that allows us to deepen our relationship with Jesus, our Savior, and ask him for his help in our humble service to others.

One final unexpected result from our Camino: Mary (and I) don't particularly like what we call "slime food:" Snails, raw oysters, mussels, clams, etc. However, on this Camino, Mary had a new-found enjoyment of "pulpo:" Boiled, and seasoned, octopus. The unexpected is all around us!!!