

My Dear Sisters and Brothers in Christ,

Our Gospel text today is one that I often use at funerals to bring comfort to families mourning the death of a loved one, hoping that Christ's beautiful words of invitation in verse 28, "Come to me, all who labor and are burdened, and I will give you rest," might be consoling. But, since I see neither coffin nor urn in front of the altar this morning this prayer of Jesus has a different, perhaps, deeper meaning for us today.

It is necessary for us to understand the context in which we listen as Jesus prays. As you read this 11th Chapter of Matthew's Gospel, you realize that Jesus is frustrated, demoralized, even depressed. His cousin, his hero, John the Baptist has been imprisoned and will soon be killed. He frets over the people who rejected John as being possessed by a demon because he came "neither eating nor drinking" are the very same people rejecting him because he "came eating and drinking, and said, "Look, he is a glutton and a drunkard, a friend of tax collectors and sinners." He is further frustrated that "the towns where most of his mighty deeds had been done" hadn't changed even a little bit. Here we see Jesus taking into account all the hard work he has done for months, even years, and he feels he hasn't accomplished a thing. Here we see Jesus angry. He curses out those towns in which he has worked so hard. "Woe to you, Chorazin!" "Woe to you, Bethsaida!" "As for you, Capernaum...you will go down to the netherworld. Jesus is hurt. He's frustrated. He feels like a failure.

That's what this 11th Chapter of Matthew's Gospel suggests to me. Think about it. Have you ever been there—feeling rejected, misunderstood, unappreciated, all your hard work coming to nothing? Have you ever felt yourself to be a total failure? That's what Jesus seems to be feeling.

St. Matthew states very clearly, "At that time", that is, in that frame of mind, Jesus turned to God in prayer. A lot of us don't do that, do we? When we feel rejected, misunderstood, unappreciated, all of our hard work coming to nothing, or like total failures, a lot of us will look for distractions—watching mindless TV shows and the like. Some of us will drink too much or drug ourselves into oblivion. And others will look for love in all the wrong places. We tend to run from our pain, rather than embrace it.

Feeling as we may feel, or have felt, Jesus turns to God in prayer. First of all let's take note of what he doesn't do as he begins his prayer. He doesn't say, "God, I am so disgusted," or "God, I just can't do this anymore," or "God, why won't you help me?" No, he doesn't say anything like that. Rather Jesus prays, "I give praise to you, Father, Lord of heaven and earth." He doesn't think about himself at all, or his circumstances, or his hurts, or his failures. His focus is on praising God, acknowledging God as His Father, praising him as Lord of heaven and earth, all that is.

Immediately he seems to get a new insight. He realizes that he has much to praise God for. Rather than being concerned about those who rejected him, Jesus gets to the point of why he is praising God in his own particular circumstances—"for although you have hidden these things

from the wise and the learned you have revealed them to the childlike.” Here it’s important for us to understand that the Lord is not praising God that only the slow, unsophisticated, naïve, or needy are following him, while the best and the brightest have abandoned him.

The key insight here is that Jesus’ message is obscure to people whose heads and hearts are too full of their own ideas and opinions. They are the self-appointed wise and worldly who won’t let go of their own rigid sense of themselves and their identity. Nor will they let go of their own interpretation of God and His Will for them. They are the ones looking down in judgment on those whom they consider less than themselves.

No, Jesus praises God for revealing the truth about Himself to the childlike. How might I describe what Jesus means by “childlike”?

I guess the best way is to look at how children respond or react to something or someone. The best example that comes to mind is the one that I experience just about every Sunday when I walk in here. Invariably little ones run up to me to hug me. Maybe at first they were prodded by their parents, but now they just do it on their own. Often if I reach the office before they come in, they’ll come into the office just to hug me. Why? I like to think it is just because they instinctively know that I love them. They are the “childlike” for whom Jesus praises God, the little ones who instinctively know that He loves them and want to follow Him.

Recognizing the instinctive love of “the little ones”, “the childlike” Jesus realizes this is God, His Father’s will, that while many may reject him, his mission, his ministry is to those who will accept his loving them.

With this recognition, there is a radical re-direction of Jesus’ prayer—from God to us, “the childlike”, his “little ones”: “Come to me, all you who labor and are burdened, and I will give you rest.” It’s almost incomprehensible, but it is true. Jesus is praying to us, pleading to us, to come to Him that He may comfort us and relieve us of our burdens.

The final part of his prayer, now addressed to us, “Take my yoke upon you and learn from me, for I am meek and humble of heart: and you will find rest for yourselves. For my yoke is easy, and my burden light,” is his plea that we connect ourselves to him so that we can learn what he has learned; he who has suffered all that we suffer; he who has been rejected as we have been rejected; he who has been as frustrated and demoralized and depressed as we are at times.

Jesus pleads with us to join ourselves to him so that we can learn what he has learned that has made his yoke easy and his burden light—learn to do what the Father wills for you.

When you think about it, this prayer of Jesus is not unlike the other prayer that he taught his disciples when they asked him, “Teach us to pray”: Our Father who art in heaven, hallowed be Thy Name, Thy kingdom come, Thy will be done, on earth as it is in heaven...”

When we know that we are doing the Father's Will, our burdens really do become light; our difficulties become bearable; and, if a cross is placed upon our shoulders, there is the awareness that we are not asked to carry it alone because in all of our brokenness, we are yoked, that is, joined to Jesus who has asked us to come to him that He may carry it with us.

Vacation is a wonderful time "to come to Jesus". May I suggest that you not fill up all this precious time with frenzied activities so much so that you return home more frazzled and worn out than when you left. Make time to "come to Jesus", share your burdens with Him. He is praying that you do. Then, settle back, secure in His love for you and ponder what is God's Will for you in the coming weeks and months and year of your life. Ask God for the grace to know His gracious Will for you that as you move forward your burdens may become light, yoked as you are to Jesus.