

Dealing with the baggage

Psychologists and spiritual writers tell us we all carry a lot of baggage. Of course they are talking about those negative influences in our lives which have left their mark, burdening us with fears and anxieties, many of which we find difficult to cope with. The roots of these may go back into our childhood and could sometimes even be the result of the baggage our parents were carrying. The prevalence of stress in modern society certainly suggests that we are not good at dealing with the things which burden us and depress us.

The image of burdens being carried comes through strongly in our liturgy today. Camels and donkeys are often referred to as beasts of burden because human beings have long used them as pack animals. They make many appearances in the Scriptures and the image the prophet Zechariah gives us of a king riding triumphant on a donkey leads us to think of Jesus' entry into Jerusalem at the beginning of Holy Week. If Jesus was the donkey's burden on Palm Sunday, the message of the Gospel is loud and clear: it is Jesus who will shoulder our burdens for us, above all in the events of Holy Week, where he allows himself to be the ultimate lamb of sacrifice, carrying the burden of our sins.

Jesus has offered us the most wonderful invitation: "Come to me, all you who labour and are overburdened, and I will give you rest."

My experience as a confessor tells me that we take great heart from this invitation. We use prayer and the Sacrament of Reconciliation to unburden ourselves of the things that cripple us most, namely our sins. But my experience also tells me that we still find it extremely difficult to take Jesus at his word and let him give us the rest and peace he promises.

Even after confessing our sins and receiving absolution, we are tempted to take the burden away with us and allow ourselves to remain troubled and anxious, wondering whether we are really lovable, whether we have really been forgiven. It is then that we need to hear Jesus reminding us that those who understand his message are not the learned and the clever, but the little children. Before they are burdened with all the sophistication of the modern world, today's children are like children in every age: naturally trusting and loving.

So there is the challenge and there is the secret: we have to recover our lost childhood, our lost innocence, at the feet of Jesus. We do not have to carry the weight of the world on our shoulders.

Many of the saints are wonderful models of how to achieve this, even when they found themselves in the most unpromising of situations, for example in the face of fierce persecution. They have taken Jesus at his word and let go of the burdens, knowing that Jesus was alongside them, helping them to bear it all.

One final point. Many non-believing psychologists admit that Catholics have a wonderful treasure in the Sacrament of Reconciliation. May we value it and use it well.

Timothy Buckley CSsR
© Redemptorists 2008