We live in a time of great social unrest. This is true within the borders of our own country as well as across national borders between us and other nations. There are ‘wars and rumors of wars.’ To say that thus it has always been does not alleviate the anxiety that accompanies such unrest. Various solutions to this unrest and violence have been advanced. Some recognize the magnitude of the problem and storm heaven with prayers for peace. Others seek to broker a peace through negotiations with those with whom there are at enmity. Still others insist that the only way to peace is through armed struggle and subsequent restraints on conquered opponents. While each of these solutions might have some merit, today’s readings offer a way to peace that some people might judge to be rather naïve. The way proposed is through the guidance of a humble leader.

The prophet Zechariah looks into the future to a king who will establish a long-desired reign of peace. This may well be an idealized picture, but it points out several very important characteristics. First, this king is triumphant and victorious (v.9). He is not a failure. Furthermore, the scope of his rule extends “from seas to sea...to the ends of the earth” (v.10). Second, despite his accomplishments, this king comes to his people with an unpretentious bearing. He does not come on a thundering stallion, but on the foal of an ass. The chariots and war horses, all military armaments, have been put aside. This king is meek. Though the oracle is a vision of a future king and reign, the Hebrew form of the verbs is prophetic perfect, indicating that in God’s time this future is already present. It is a kind of Old Testament ‘already-but-not-yet.’

The theme of meekness is found in the gospel passage as well. Jesus identifies himself as “meek and humble of heart” (v.29). However, he is not meek because he has been beaten down. Quite the contrary. His self-identification follows his prayerful acknowledgement of his extraordinary relationship with God. He states that God has placed all things in his hands, and that no one knows God except through him. Jesus is more than a triumphant, victorious king. The honor that he enjoys is divine, and yet he is meek and humble. Furthermore, he invites his hearers to follow him (“learn from me”).

Unfortunately, this gospel passage has too often been considered an invitation to personal piety. We must remember that Jesus and his earliest followers lived under the rule of the Roman Empire. Palestine of that day was an occupied country. What some might view as personal piety probably had political implications. For this reason, some people of his day might have considered his admonition rather dangerous. Others might have seen it as being naïve.
To what do these readings call us today? Regardless of which path we choose as we face the unrest and violence in our world, we must be inspired by the spirit of Jesus our messianic king who, though filled with the power of God, presented himself as meek and humble. In other words, he did not use power to intimidate or coerce. Rather, he led with another type of power through respect and gentleness.

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