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With what images do oppressed people express hope that their plight will be overcome? Naturally they tend to depict their own community as honest and innocent in the face of evildoers, and many would hope for a quick and resolute intervention by a valiant leader who would set all things right. Their past history would provide heroes to emulate.

The great teachers of Israel often harked back to the heroic deeds of David, who freed their ancestors from Philistine oppression. Often they expressed confidence in his dynasty, assured that successors would ward off attacks of their enemies and provide good government for the internal affairs of the society. Tragically, as in other societies, many of Israel's leaders failed. After the destruction of Jerusalem and exile in Babylon (586-538 B.C.) the people hoped that the dynasty would be restored to its former prestige. Even when that failed to happen, they read the ancient prophecies and psalms with faith that a son of David would reign again, inaugurating the new age when God's authority would be recognized and obeyed by all humanity.

The prophets realized the folly of relying merely on superior strength -- military or economic -- for the maintenance of a just and peaceful society. The second part of the book of Zechariah reiterates the message that the God of Israel wishes that war be abolished from the experience of Israel and the world. A newly anointed king of a neighboring country might ride into his capital on a stallion girded for battle. In contrast, the King who comes to Jerusalem will choose a donkey. This befits a vision of modesty and humility, showing that the leader serves his people and relies on God for the strength he needs. The picture also alludes to the prophecy about Judah (the ancestor of David) in the blessing of Jacob for his twelve sons. A lion in repose, whose authority will not be challenged, "he will tether his donkey to the vine" (Gn 49:10-11).

Under the power of the Roman Empire, many Judaeans at the time of Jesus felt this presence as the heel of oppression. Some hoped for a warrior Messiah (Anointed One) who would liberate the chosen people. They forgot that the first son of David who succeeded him was Solomon, whose name means "man of peace." Even after his resurrection, Jesus was asked: "Lord, are you going to restore the kingdom to Israel now?" (Acts 1:6). Indeed, he had given the principles for establishing God's kingdom of justice, love and peace in Israel and throughout the world. However, this would be accomplished, not by military or political force, but by individuals and societies responding from inner conviction to the divine will. "That's not the way freedom is achieved!" object the worldly wise. So they go on, wreaking havoc upon their societies generation after generation. Each new leader imposes his will upon the multitudes in the name of liberty, perhaps, and with the promise of a better life. Some changes take place but the old abuses soon creep in again.
To whom do the poor and oppressed turn? With the gift of faith and wisdom learned in affliction, they can see the message of Jesus' suffering and death. They do hope - and rightly so - for a way of life that allows them to express their inherent human dignity and to have a share in the world's goods to provide for their families. They expect the Church to guide them towards these goals. But they also know that, in present and future trials, they should respond to the Master's invitation. "Come to me, all you who labor and are burdened, and I will give you rest" (Mt 11:28). The true goal of every life is not only justice and peace, but intimacy with the Teacher whose meekness and humility triumphed over the oppressive forces of a world that glories in power and might.