

It is the fervent hope and prayer of our nation that the elections in Iraq this weekend will help the people of that country step toward peace and stability. We pray a lot for the safety of our soldiers, and that is important, but we also pray for the liberation of Iraqis who were oppressed.

The liberation of the oppressed shows up throughout the bible, and as stories go, it is an unusual theme. Many stories in world literature tell about the victory of the strong, whether it's the battle of Troy, the battle of Lepanto or the Battle of the Bulge. But the bible frequently records the victory of the weak – whether it's Moses in Egypt, David against Goliath, or Jesus on the cross. History is often told from the perspective of the conqueror, but the bible zeroes in on those who are lowly. History may be interested in the strong, but God is interested in the oppressed.

Jesus says as much in the Beatitudes: Blessed are the poor in spirit, the mourners, the meek, and those without righteousness. To prepare us to hear those words, the lectionary today offers a first reading from Zephaniah, which reports God's care of the humble. Zephaniah was one of the prophets at the time of the exile. When the Israelites were oppressed by the Assyrians, many of God's chosen people were captured as prisoners of war and taken away from their homeland, but a remnant remained in Jerusalem. These few who remained behind were not strong soldiers bravely defending their city. They were the weak, the poor and the powerless who posed no threat to the Assyrian army. But when the exiles were set free, the remnant helped reestablish God's chosen people at their homeland in Jerusalem.

At the beginning of today's reading, Zephaniah addresses the people: "Seek the Lord, all you humble of the earth, who have observed his law; seek justice, seek humility." Then we hear the voice of God saying, "I will leave as a remnant in your midst a people humble and lowly, who shall take refuge in the name of the Lord: the remnant of Israel." God wanted to find virtues like faithfulness and truth, which were evident among the poor, not among the rich. God wanted people of good character more than people of wealth and power. In our eyes, some of the world's worst evils are poverty and disease, but in God's eyes deceit and wrongdoing are worse. You can be poor, you can be sick – and still be loved by God because of how you live your life with its challenges.

Our society today still places a lot of value in stockpiling weapons of war, pursuing positions of authority, and dominating competitors in business and sports. But the bible expresses different values. It protects those who are weak, and it calls upon us to take their side. We meet the powerless every day. They are made fun of at school; they are struggling to make ends meet in our neighborhoods; they are dodging bullets in Iraq. God gives us ample opportunity to bring freedom to those who are oppressed.