

Fourth Sunday of the Year January 29, 2017

Readings: Zephaniah 2:3; 3:12-13; 1 Corinthians 1:26-31; Matthew 5:1-12

The readings of today tell us how we can pattern our lives according to the divine invitation. They call us to reflect upon the many ways in which we can respond to God and give him our total attention. God communicates with us in many ways and he seeks a response from us. The whole church always strives to follow faithfully in the footsteps of Christ. The Gospel of today directs us to a method in which we can respond to him. We have the Sermon on the Mount as presented by Matthew, which is the Christian ethical teaching and the core of the Christian way of life. Jesus gives us the Beatitudes in his sermon delivered from a Mountain and the Mountain in the Bible indicates a holy place where God is present. Here Jesus presents us with real opposing values, those of Jesus and the world. He teaches us that we can create happiness and the capacity for joy by ourselves and radiate them to others, to receive the Kingdom of Heaven. In the first reading the prophet describes the religious degradation and political intrigue of his time and shows the people a better way to live. If they serve God, they will find the peace and happiness they desire. He invites them to a change of heart. In the second reading Paul reminds all the Corinthians that they owe everything good in their lives to God. He reminds them that they have only God to thank for the ability to participate in the plan conceived by divine wisdom. Chosen, called and guided by God alone, we make our boast in the One Source of Life. He shows them the true contrast between the Values of Jesus and the values of the world.

Today's First Reading from the Book of Zephaniah suggests that if the humble seek to obey the commands of the Lord, seeking righteousness and humility, then on the Day of Judgment, they will be hidden from the wrath of the Lord. Because of their simplicity, their humility, their righteousness, the Lord God will go easy on them, and overlook their faults. It is because the humble of the world maintain a personal daily relationship with the Lord, abandoning them to His Divine Will. This opposes the rich and proud who do not have time for their Creator. Zephaniah urges kings and people to value justice and humility. Both ideals are grounded in total service to God. If God's standards take precedence over earthly concerns, the sort of conditions will prevail that value all citizens of the kingdom as God's children. Humility before God is essential to realize the gracious gifts from God. In the final verses the prophet presents with the image of the sheep grazing peacefully in a pasture. This image is associated with royalty that will be true of Israel if its kings set aside their policies of deceit and serve the Lord in fidelity. They are truly the chosen representatives of the divine king of Israel. Speaking of the day of the Lord the prophet says that the righteous will bring healing and restoration.

In today's Second Reading Paul tells us that God's choice is unique and he chooses those whom the world considers weak. Obviously, some Corinthians thought that they were elite and superior to others. Paul puts them in their place by emphasizing that most who came to believe in Christ were the nobodies. He tells them that God chose what is foolish in the world to shame the wise. He chose what is weak in the world to shame the strong. He chose what is low and despised in the world, things that are not, to reduce to nothing things that are, so that no one might boast in His presence. By this Divine choice, God destroys the pride of those who consider themselves as something special. Paul reminds the faithful that among the educated in Corinth, those of authority, the powerful and those of the noble class, only a few had been called to the faith. By this Divine choice, no one could boast that they were saved by their own works but by the law of faith. He tells them that God was the source of life in Christ Jesus, who became for them wisdom from God, and righteousness and sanctification and redemption. Paul concludes by stating, that if anyone boasts, must boast in the Lord. All should recognize that all good that has come into their lives is due to Christ crucified. Christ is the one who brought true dignity to those of the upper class and the lower class.

In the Gospel of today Jesus presents the disciples with his discourse, the Sermon on the Mount and begins with a series of nine Beatitudes. Here Matthew's presents Jesus as the new Moses proclaiming the divine message to people. The Sermon on Mount is in fact the first of the five discourses of Jesus as given in Matthew's Gospel. This Sermon is a collection of sayings and teachings of Jesus focusing on the personal qualities expected of a disciple. In a religious context beatitude is a statement in the indicative mood beginning with a form of the adjective Blessed, declaring certain people to be in a privileged, fortunate circumstance. The Beatitudes have a quality and depth which goes far beyond the mere moral requirements of the Ten Commandments. They call for a very special relationship with God and with the people around us. They involve not merely a personal observance of some ethical rules but a deep concern to be involved in the building up of the world we live in, helping to make it a place of truth, love, compassion, justice, freedom and peace. This is what the Kingdom is all about. At a first glance at this sermon it appears that Jesus is saying to people that they are blessed because they have been forced to live in situations of diminishment. Throughout Christian history, several strange spiritualities have come up that emphasize the need to strive for the experience of diminishment as some form of deserved punishment and shunning of this world. None of that is found in the Beatitudes proclaimed by Jesus. Certainly, Jesus is not declaring that a person is blessed because he or she must live in situations of deprivation. It is just the opposite. These people are blessed in spite of their experiences of diminishment.

Beatitudes are much older than the gospel and can be found in the wisdom literature of the Bible in the O.T. Jesus uses Beatitudes to instill hope in people whose lives have given them little to hope for. This hope can be found in the very structure of each of the Beatitudes. The first part of the Beatitude describes a serious condition of diminishment ranging from poverty to persecution. No doubt these conditions were real and people suffered greatly in each situation. The good news is found in the second part of the Beatitude. This second part proclaims a future situation that will be reversal of the present. However, one can ask what that situation is which brings about a change. The fullness of the Kingdom of heaven will bring with it the reversal of the current state of diminishment and powerlessness. The radical change has already begun with the preaching and ministry of Jesus. Current reality is not the only reality, nor is it the fullness of reality. There is more to come, but for the people of faith it will not be the same. It is hope and faith in this coming new reality that will give people the strength to persevere and survive their current reality of suffering. In other words the Beatitudes give the present suffering a meaning. The meaning is not that suffering in and of itself is good. The meaning is that it will not last forever but will be transformed into final, ultimate joy. It is because of this good news of hope rooted in faith that Jesus proclaims his hearers to be blessed.

The beatitudes of Jesus are the prophetic pronouncements aimed at those who are presently in dire circumstances but who will be vindicated at the final coming of God's Kingdom. All of the beatitudes express a conviction that those who believe in and are committed to the coming and already present Kingdom of God and will experience a radical transformation that can only be captured by the word blessed. The confidence behind this faith in radical change is based on the authority of the one making the proclamation: Jesus Christ, the Son of God. Therefore, believers are not to expect instant gratification as the immediate result of faith. They are the committed followers of Jesus who can fully grasp the present circumstance with an eschatological conviction of the future fulfillment of the Kingdom. They give the hope that the kingdom of God will come and is already in the hearts of people.

Each of the Beatitude starts with the word 'blessed' which is sometimes translated 'happy'. However, it is more accurate to translate it as 'fortunate' meaning, persons who belong to the 'kingdom of heaven'. These describe a situation that exists when we live according to those values, namely of truth and love, of compassion and justice, of peace, freedom and sharing, qualities which emanate from God himself. Jesus says that blessed are those who are poor in spirit that is those who are aware of their basic poverty and are in need of help and support of God. The poor in the Bible are not just the materially destitute but all those who in their need turn to

God. Poor in spirit are those who clearly acknowledge that they depend totally on God. The word meek is found only in Matthew and then just three times. It is normally translated as "gentle and kindly". It is the very opposite of arrogance, bullying and violent manipulation. It embodies deep respect and tenderness towards all. It learns to find and radiate goodness everywhere. Blessed are those who are gentle who reach out to others in care and compassion and tenderness. There are those blessed who mourn or those who are in grief or sorrow and they will be assured of comfort from the loving community in Christ.

Those who hunger and thirst for what is right and work for it will have a life of dignity and self-respect. Those who are merciful will have compassion and forgiveness all around them. Special praise is given to those pure in heart and they will be able to see God in the sense that they will know God. In their knowledge of God, they will enjoy a filial relationship with God. The peace makers are blessed as they are the ones who will be called the children of God. Finally those who are persecuted in the cause of right are blessed and will rejoice because reward is great in heaven. Here, the Gospel speaks of two kinds of persecution, namely being persecuted for what is right and secondly for spreading and defending the Word of God in fidelity to Jesus and his Church. Their eternal reward is spiritual. Those who persevere to the end in obedience and humility will inherit the Kingdom of Heaven as sons of God. There is an implicit contrast between the various kingdoms of the earth and the ultimate Kingdom of God. The power of ultimate transformation belongs only to the kingdom of God in spite of how things may appear. This is the vision Jesus wanted to proclaim to his disciples and to the Church as he began his public ministry. It is as if he places on them the code of conduct as they begin their lives as his own disciples. If they have the courage to follow Jesus they will remain blessed both now and in the age to come.

We must remember that just as the Ten Commandments are the core of the Jewish way of life and a law to follow, so Beatitudes are the core of the Christian way of life. Yet, they are often not understood as such. In many ways, they are largely ignored as guides to Christian living and many Christians still regard the Ten Commandments as their life guide. They are the norms to be observed even without any inner feelings. The Beatitudes are not commandments and they are not so much things to be done or rules to be kept as deep-down attitudes of mind. Their observance is only possible with a deep love of God and of other people. They can never be kept fully as they are goals that are always calling us further. But they never leave any room for complacency. One can never say about the Beatitudes what the rich man said to Jesus, namely, that he had kept all the commandments since he was young. The Beatitudes must be understood in the context of the Kingdom. The Kingdom is not a place. It is that complex of

relationships that exists between God and those who have totally accepted him as the Lord and guide of their lives and who share God's vision of what life is about. So, in the Kingdom it is not the rich, the successful and the powerful that are really happy and fortunate but the meek and lowly. Jesus shows how different his values are and at the start of his ministry he gives a new teaching and throws down a challenge to conventional thinking.

In the days when an ice cream sundae cost much less, a 10-year-old boy entered a hotel coffee shop and sat at a table. A waitress put a glass of water in front of him. 'How much is an ice cream sundae?' he asked. 'Fifty cents,' replied the waitress. The little boy pulled his hand out of his pocket and studied the coins in it. 'Well, how much is a plain dish of ice cream?' he inquired. By now more people were waiting for a table and the waitress was growing impatient. 'Thirty-five cents,' she brusquely replied. The little boy again counted his coins. 'I'll have the plain ice cream,' he said. The waitress brought the ice cream, put the bill on the table and walked away. The boy finished the ice cream, paid the cashier and left. When the waitress came back, she began to cry as she wiped down the table. There, placed neatly beside the empty dish, were two nickels and five pennies. You see, he couldn't have the sundae, because he had to have enough left to leave her a tip.

Several years ago, a priest was transferred to a distant village church in his diocese. Some weeks after he arrived, he had an occasion to ride the bus from his church to the nearest town. When he sat down, he discovered that the driver had accidentally given him a quarter too much change. As he considered what to do, he told himself, 'You'd better give the quarter back. It would be wrong to keep it.' Then he thought, 'Oh, forget it, it's only a quarter. Who would worry about this little amount? Anyway, the bus company makes huge profits; they will never miss it. Accept it as a 'gift from God' and keep quiet.' When his stop came, he paused momentarily at the door, and then he handed the quarter to the driver and said, 'Here, you gave me too much change. The driver, with a smile, replied, 'you are the new priest in the village, right?' 'Yes' he replied. 'Well, I have lately been thinking a lot about going somewhere to pray. I just wanted to see what you would do if I gave you extra change. You'll see me at church on Sunday.' When the priest stepped off of the bus, he literally grabbed the nearest light pole, held on, and said, 'Oh God, I almost sold you for a quarter!'

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