



4th Sunday in Ordinary Time



Date: Sunday, January 29, 2017 | **Season:** Ordinary Time before Easter | **Year:** A

First Reading: Zephaniah 2:3, 3:12–13

Responsorial Psalm: Psalm 146:6–10

Second Reading: 1 Corinthians 1:26–31

Gospel Acclamation: Matthew 5:12a

Gospel Reading: Matthew 5:1–12a

Preached at: the Holy Trinity Catholic Church in Braamfontein in the Archdiocese of Johannesburg, South Africa.

In our first reading today the Prophet Zephaniah, writing some 600 years before Christ, writes of the people he calls the anawim, which means a remnant, the leftovers, a tiny band of God's poor and forgotten. The characteristic feature of these humble and lowly people is that they shall seek refuge in the name of the Lord. Not in earthly things – but in their intimacy and relationship with God. They survived to teach us not to be arrogant or boastful about our religion, but to always attribute to God their blessings. Belonging to a religion was not something to boast about – or to wield over those who didn't. God had chosen these people before they had chosen God – and the thanks and glory were to go to God. Similarly, in the second reading St Paul reminds us that God chose what is foolish in the world to shame the wise, God chose what is weak in the world to shame the strong. God sides with what is low and despised in the world.

It seems that God is telling us that what the world values and esteems, is not necessarily what he does. We are called to see the world as God sees it, and that sometimes turns our world upside down.

In our Gospel we have the famous beginning of the Sermon on the Mount, where Jesus explains to his committed disciples what God's reign is like. Many people think his sermon is Jesus' own set of commandments – and that if we were to live like that, the world would be a better place.

But if we imagine that this is Jesus telling us how to behave, we will have misread what is going on. These ‘blessings’, the ‘wonderful news’ that he’s announcing, is not him saying ‘try hard to live like this.’ They are saying that people who already are like that are in good shape. They should be happy and celebrate.

Jesus is not suggesting that these are simply timeless truths about the way the world is, about human behaviour. If he was saying that, he was empirically wrong. Mourners often go uncomforted, the meek do not inherit the earth, those who long for justice frequently take that longing to the grave. No, this is an upside-down world, or perhaps a right-way-up world. This is an announcement, not a philosophical analysis of the world. It’s about something that’s starting to happen with Jesus, not about a general truth of life. It is gospel: good news, not good advice.

When Jesus previously said to his first disciples, “Follow me” it was because he recognized God was doing something new. The Beatitudes we heard today, this list of ‘wonderful news’, is part of his invitation, part of his summons, part of his way of saying that God is at work in a fresh way and that this is what it looks like. Jesus is announcing a new era for God’s people and God’s world. He is saying that the ways in which we had grown up seeing the world are incorrect. Even today, most people think that wonderful news consists of success, wealth, long life, victory in battle. Jesus is offering wonderful news for the humble, the poor, the mourners, the peacemakers.

The word for ‘wonderful news’ is often translated ‘blessed’, and part of the point is that this is God’s wonderful news. God is acting in and through Jesus to turn the world upside down, to turn Israel upside down, to pour out ‘blessings’ on all who now turn to him and accept the new thing that he is doing. But the real point here is not to offer a list of what sort of people God normally blesses. The point is to announce God’s new covenant with his People. Because in the Gospel of Matthew there is a parallel to what has happened earlier in the Bible.

We will recall that in the book of Deuteronomy, the people came through the wilderness and arrived at the border of the promised land, and God gave them a solemn covenant. He listed the blessings and the curses that would come upon them if they were obedient or disobedient. Now in the Gospel of Matthew the

Evangelist has shown us Jesus, coming out of Egypt (in chapter 2), through the water and the wilderness (chapters 3 and 4), and into the land of promise (4:12–25). Here, now, in Chapter 5, is his new covenant. God's promises to us.

But when do these promises come true? We might be tempted to say “in heaven” of course. If we listened carefully to the Gospel we learnt that ‘the kingdom of heaven’ belongs to the poor in spirit and the persecuted, and there’s a great reward ‘in heaven’ for those who suffer persecution for Jesus’ sake. This, though, is a misunderstanding of the meaning of ‘heaven’. NT Wright explained that “Heaven is God’s space, where full reality exists, close by our ordinary (‘earthly’) reality and interlocking with it. One day heaven and earth will be joined together for ever, and the true state of affairs, at present out of sight, will be unveiled.” Let’s remember that Jesus said that the meek will inherit the earth, and that can hardly happen in a disembodied heaven after death.

No – to understand fully we must remember that this is the beginning of Jesus’ sermon, and like all good homilies they make sense in the end. In the next chapter Jesus teaches his disciples how to pray. We all remember the Our Father. We are to pray that God’s kingdom will come, and God’s will be done, ‘on earth as it is in heaven’.

These beatitudes will make sense here and now if we start living as if God is our king. Jesus is telling his disciples, telling us today, that those who follow Jesus are to begin to live by this rule here and now to bring about God’s Kingdom. That’s the point of the Sermon on the Mount, and these ‘beatitudes’ in particular. They are a call to live in the present in the way that will make sense in God’s promised future; because that future has arrived in the present in Jesus of Nazareth.

St Paul reminds us that God made Jesus Christ our source of life and wisdom. So even though it may seem upside down, we are called to believe that it is in fact the right way up. We are challenged to see that our status quo is in fact horribly out of synch with what God desires. God knows, in today’s world, we need men and women who are peacemakers, who are able to forgive, who have a taste for righteousness, who are prepared to be persecuted for what is right, and who stand up to corruption and work to defend the defenceless in our society.

Let us today try to live our lives by these beatitudes – and to mean what we say when we pray the Our Father: that thy Kingdom come, thy will be done, on earth as it is in heaven. Then we will be like the anawim in the First Reading, who keep putting their trust in the Lord, who do not boast of anything other than knowing God through Jesus Christ.

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