

## 4<sup>th</sup> Sunday OT – Matthew 5:1-12

Matthew has prepared his readers for the Sermon on the Mount by his introduction to the ministry of Jesus which we read last week. In Galilee of the gentiles, he proclaims the Kingdom. Accompanied by disciples, he teaches, preaches, and heals. With his disciples, he now goes up a mountain. At this new Sinai, the disciples play the part of Moses and Jesus who addresses them, speaks to them in the person of God.

Originally, as in Luke, the Beatitudes, with which the Sermon begins, were a summons to the *poor*, the *hungry*, and *those who wept*. In Matthew, it is clear that the kingdom embraces many more than these. It belongs to all who are *poor in spirit*, all who hunger for justice, and *all whom the evil in the world and personal sin causes to weep*.

The additional Beatitudes which Matthew lists, find a basis in later parts of the gospel. The *meek* are those who make their own the meekness of Jesus and his attitude as he entered Jerusalem as a meek king on a donkey. The *merciful* are those who imitate Jesus in the mercy he offered the Canaanite woman and who know that God prefers mercy to sacrifice. The *clean of heart* practice a higher righteousness than the Pharisees in recognizing that internal rather than external cleanliness pleases God. When sent on their mission, the disciples would be *peacemakers*. Through the cross of Christ would the barriers between peoples be removed and peace established.

These beatitudes are sometimes called the *constitution of the kingdom of heaven*. They offer a self-portrait of Jesus. He concludes by addressing his hearers directly, and warns of the cost of living out such ideals.

Some translations use the word "Happy" as in "Happy are those..." "The beatitudes are really not about happy people. One must be very cautious of suggesting to the discouraged and hurting that they are so blessed because they're in this lousy state of affairs," writes Dominican Janet Schlichting.

She tells that, "...we are inescapably called to be voices for the voiceless, and to suffer for it...we are the ones seized by and sent by Christ Jesus and the (Holy) Spirit as blessing—to be blessing and to give blessing to these who cannot see any blessing anywhere—and try to be a living word of God to them by witnessing as Christ bearers, as "Other Christs" or as Saint Paul also writes, "Ambassadors of Christ."

Sister Janet also reminds us that we **can't** *romanticize the beatitudes or spiritualize* them. We can't work on them as virtues, or as states of soul to be practiced diligently so we become more Christ-like...Let's see...how should I work on lowliness, how can I be more poor, or practice poverty of spirit, or be more meek and humble...and so on."

Christ calls us and the Spirit sends us just as we are, with all our blessings and blemishes. We do acts of kindness and we speak humbly to such an extent that they become habits. And that is what **Virtue** is about, habits of good acts, just as **Vices** are habits of bad acts. There is just one small difference. As a priest, I know that many good people love, (too strong?) enjoy, are **attracted** to committing certain vices. That is why they come to me and confess them because they felt guilty. But depending on the level of the "badness of the act," some of them never get confessed, and so remain a vice. They feel it is not bad enough to confess, and then wonder why they can't break the bad habit.

It takes grace to break bad habits, and the worse the habit the greater the grace. How many have already broken their New Year's Resolution, assuming you made one? How does this concern the Beatitudes? How does good habits lead us into the Beatitudes, or make us into other Christs? The meek, the merciful, the clean of heart, and the peacemakers are those who practice meekness, mercifulness, cleanliness of heart and peacemaking through small acts in everyday life until they become a habit! Imagine if we even became known for one of the above, say, a peacemaker. What a difference the world around you would like. We can almost practice the four above virtues everyday without ever encountering the opportunity to use them.

As for the poor, the hungry and those who weep, either the opportunity comes our way or we take the way to the poor and hungry. The rest we can put ourselves in such state of mind through prayer and meditation: meekness, mercifulness, clean thoughts, peacemaker, compassion for those who weep. Again there is one small difference that needs to be mentioned at I hinted at above with vices. We need to be **attracted to virtue**, that is, attracted to habits of good acts. Saint Ignatius reminds us that bad spirits tempt us with bad acts, but good spirits also remind us of the attraction of good acts. We choose.

Story of working with the mentally challenged.