

4TH ORDINARY SUNDAY—YEAR A

In the gospel of today presents us with the Beatitudes. What did that mean for his Jewish audience then, and to us today? Let us look at the setting. Mathew says that Jesus “. . . went up the mountain, and after he had sat down, he began to teach them. . . .”

Moses went up the mountain of Sinai and brought down with him the Ten Commandments. The Beatitudes are the new commandments. The Beatitudes both fulfill and complete the Ten Commandments. Moses brought down the commandments, but Jesus takes people up the mountain. He is giving them a higher law. The Ten Commandments were directed toward life on earth. But the new law, the Beatitudes, is directed toward heaven. All humans long to be happy. The Beatitudes define our Christian goal of eternal happiness and explain the attitudes and actions necessary to reach it. The Beatitudes are the “owner’s manual” that Jesus gave to each of us at Baptism. For 20 centuries, Christ’s followers have strived to practice the Beatitudes. It could be called the Charter of Christianity and the Magna Carta of humanity. Obviously, the Beatitudes were given not to increase our knowledge but to change our lives.

In today’s Gospel, Jesus instructs His disciples in the paradoxical blessedness of poverty, hunger, sorrow, and persecution. In poverty, we recognize God’s reign; in hunger, His providence; in sorrow, true happiness; and in persecution, true joy.

St. Mathew presents Jesus as the new Moses who teaches us that Christianity is more than obeying the Ten Commandments. Poverty in spirit is the first condition for real happiness. *Poor in spirit* refers to spiritual and material poverty. It is the opposite of spiritual pride. It is absolute dependence on God and others. It means trusting in God more than trusting in ourselves. We are poor in spirit when we surrender our plans to God, asking for His help. Being poor in spirit requires admitting that we are sinners in need of God’s grace and help.

What Jesus meant when he said “happy are those who mourn” is “*happy are those who are sorry for their sins and the sins of others.*” It is important that we mourn for our sins and sufferings and the sins and suffering of others. On every first Friday of the month, we have All-Night Adoration to mourn, do reparation, and make amends for our sins and the sins of the world.

Jesus also tells us that if we are to be happy we are to be meek. Who are the meek? The description St. Augustine gives is, “Those who do not yield to insults and who conquer evil with good.” So, a person who is gentle or meek is someone who is patient with others and who doesn’t retaliate whenever they experience insults, persecutions, slander, or other forms of harm from other people. “Blessed are the meek.” Why? Because “They shall inherit the earth.” That is a very paradoxical thing to say. If you look at our world, who is it that inherits the earth and inherits the land? Well, it’s the powerful, it’s the violent, and it’s those who engage in war in order to take over other people’s lands. But Jesus says that it is the meek who will inherit the earth. He says



we will be happy when we hunger and thirst for righteousness. He’s describing those who literally are starving or thirsting for righteousness and justice. Righteousness means in the sense of holiness of being right with God, but also of justice in the sense of doing what’s right toward others. They seek right relationships with God and others.

“Blessed are the merciful.” What does it mean to be merciful? It means to forgive others’ faults, to forgive others’ sins, even when they don’t deserve it. That’s the quintessential aspect of mercy. And so, what Jesus is saying here is that people who are merciful are happy, because they shall obtain mercy from God—they shall be forgiven by God even when they don’t deserve it.

The sixth Beatitude: “Blessed are the pure in heart, for they shall see God.” What Jesus is describing here according to St. Augustine is that “People who act with integrity, who avoid compromise in their hearts, who keep their hearts and their minds free from sin and free from the defilements of the world shall see God.” So, Jesus is talking about a certain purity of heart—a certain cleanliness of heart—that prepares us to see the one who is all holy; namely, to see the face of God in the beatific vision.

Jesus says “Happy are the peacemakers.” Who are the peacemakers? It’s those who reconcile, who seek reconciliation with others, who seek peace with others, and also those who seek to foster reconciliation between others as well. This was a very important idea in 1st-Century Judaism. The word *shalom*, the Hebrew word for peace, is to this day still a standard Jewish greeting. So, Jesus here is taking something very common in Judaism and making clear that those who make peace with others and who foster peace, shall be called sons of God.

The final Beatitude is “Happy are they who are persecuted for the sake of righteousness.” This would describe any group or any person who is slandered or falsely accused or reviled specifically for doing the right thing, or for bearing witness to Christ—for being a disciple of Jesus. If you are a victim of this, then you should count yourself happy because “Yours is the kingdom of heaven,” and because that’s what they did to the prophets in the Old Testament. So, one of the signs of being a true prophet is that people speak falsely against you, they speak ill against you, and they speak evil against you—just as they did of Jesus Himself.

The Beatitudes propose to us a way of life, inviting us to identify with the poor, those who mourn, the meek, and those who hunger and thirst after justice. They challenge us to be compassionate people, to be pure in heart, and to become the peacemakers in our dealings with one another, in our families, and in society at large—even when this approach will expose us to ridicule and persecution.

“As long as you did it to one of these, you did it to me” is the criterion for our Last Judgment. The promises that Jesus attaches to the Beatitudes are eschatological. Practicing these Beatitudes will bring us true happiness in this world and in the world to come.