

Homily for the 4th Sunday in Ordinary Time, Year A

February 1, 2026

St. Bavo Parish

Rev. Peter J. Pacini, C.S.C.

First Reading: Zephaniah 2:3; 3:12-13 (Seek the Lord... seek justice, seek humility.)

Responsory: Psalm 146 (Blessed are the poor in spirit; the kingdom of heaven is theirs!)

Second Reading: 1 Corinthians 1:26-31 (God chose the weak to shame the strong.)

Gospel: Matthew 5:1-12a (The Beatitudes.)

Today Jesus begins his famous Sermon on the Mount with a list of “beatitudes.” This literary form was quite common throughout the ancient Middle East, including in the Hebrew Scriptures. In the earlier parts of the Old Testament, beatitudes tend to be pronounced upon people who find themselves in particularly *fortunate* situations, because of their piety or their faithfulness to God. For example, we read: “Blessed are those who delight in God’s law”; “Blessed are those who take refuge in the Lord”; and, “Blessed are those whose sins are forgiven.” To be sure, all of these people are blessed in their *current circumstances*, for they have received God’s favor. In the later books of the Old Testament, however, a new type of beatitude emerges. As the concept of resurrection after death starts to take hold among a large segment of the Jewish population, there is a shift toward beatitudes which promise divine vindication *in the next life* for those who suffer unjustly in this life. In his carefully crafted sermon, Jesus appears to be blending both forms of beatitudes together, to suggest that people who strive to do God’s will under difficult circumstances are *already* blessed in this life, but have even *greater* blessings awaiting them in heaven.

The structure of Jesus’ eight beatitudes cleverly conveys this sense of the blessings being present already, but not yet completely fulfilled. The first and last beatitudes both declare their blessing in the *present* tense – “theirs *is* the kingdom of heaven” – while all six beatitudes in between state their blessings as promises to be fulfilled in the future – “they *will be* comforted,” “they *will inherit* the land,” “they *will be* satisfied,” etc. This duality seems especially appropriate when coming from Jesus, who has already transformed the world by his Incarnation, but has not yet completed his saving mission by dying on the cross and rising again. His grace and mercy are already present to his disciples here and now, as he teaches them from the mountaintop, but the riches that he has in store for those who believe in him cannot even be imagined yet!

The people whom Jesus declares “blessed” in this passage are not those whom the world generally considers to be blessed or fortunate. Apparently, God sees them very differently. God looks favorably upon their strivings in this life, and he assures them of consolations in the next life. The secret to their beatitude seems to be the attitude with which they approach life, with all of its challenges and afflictions. For example, the first beatitude says, “Blessed are the poor in spirit” – not just the *materially* poor, but the *poor in spirit*. Jesus is describing the inner attitude of those who accept their own powerlessness in this world and trustingly lean on God for support. Jesus suggests that the kingdom of heaven *already belongs* to such as these, because they have made the Lord their strength. They have embraced the Kingdom of God, even in the midst of their struggles.

Those who *mourn* are blessed, not because they are mourning, but because they look to God for comfort. Jesus assures them that they will find their consolation in God, though he does not say *when* – whether in this life or the next. Most likely, he means that God will both comfort them *now*, in the midst of their affliction, *and* he will free them from all their suffering in the life to come.

The *meek* are those who refrain from responding to their situation with anger or with force, and instead wait patiently for the Lord to set things right *for them*. Jesus is actually quoting from a psalm, in which the land that will be inherited is the Promised Land of Canaan. Here he is speaking figuratively about the Kingdom of God as a *spiritual* Promised Land, reserved for those who allow God to lead them there, rather than trying to take hold of it by their own power.

Those who *hunger and thirst for righteousness* are not satisfied with the status quo. They earnestly seek their own path toward righteousness, and they strongly desire that God's will may prevail upon the earth. Jesus blesses and encourages their "holy frustration," promising that urgent longings which are directed toward *righteousness*, rather than lesser things, *will be satisfied*. Again, the "when" is left deliberately ambiguous. Perfect righteousness is found only in heaven, yet their hunger and thirst will surely lead them to greater righteousness here in this life. And, their personal efforts to strive after holiness will undoubtedly have a positive effect on the people around them, leading to greater justice in the world, too.

The beatitude on *mercy* reflects a key teaching from the Old Testament, which has been carried over unchanged into the New Testament. Jesus expresses the reciprocal nature of mercy: if you give it, you will receive it. But, at the heart of this teaching is the understanding that to be merciful is to *imitate God*. Those who are merciful are blessed to embody one of the defining characteristics of divine love. Surely, they will also be the beneficiaries of that same mercy for all of their sins.

The *clean of heart* are those who love God and God's will with single-hearted devotion. Their vision of God is not muddled by mixed motives and conflicting desires. They want what God wants, pure and simple. To promise that they *will see God* suggests that they will one day see *perfectly* what they already see better than most. For even now, their attention remains laser focused on doing *only* the will of God.

The *peacemakers* share in Christ's mission to reconcile the world to God, by restoring harmony to broken relationships. Peacemaking is a thankless, but *godly* task. Since it reflects God's own work in the world, it's fitting that those who dedicate themselves to it should be called "children of God."

The final group of people to be declared "blessed" are those who are *persecuted for the sake of righteousness*. Since Jesus has already commended those who hunger and thirst for righteousness, to be *persecuted* for pursuing that goal seems like the greatest form of injustice. However, Jesus might be setting up his disciples for what he says next: "Blessed are *you* when you are persecuted *because of me*." The ultimate beatitude is the blessing pronounced upon *all of us* who follow Jesus through any and all hardships that the Gospel may demand of us. The measure of our blessings will not be how rich or successful or popular we become, but how closely we have conformed our lives and our wills to those of Christ. And the *fulfillment* of all our blessings will come when we rise to eternal life *with him* and share in his glory for all eternity.