

Homily for the 4th Sunday in Ordinary Time

January 29, 2023

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 considers to be in a very fortunate or advantageous position. 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 before the 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 the comfort that they seek, though he does not say *when* – whether in this life or the next. Most likely, he means that the Lord will comfort them now in their affliction *and* release them from all of their pain 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 might.

Those who hunger and thirst for righteousness are not satisfied with the status quo. They earnestly seek the path of righteousness for themselves, and they strongly desire that God's will may prevail upon the earth. Jesus blesses and encourages this "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, the hunger and thirst itself will surely lead people to greater righteousness here in this life. And, their personal efforts to strive for holiness will undoubtedly have a positive effect on the people around them, leading to greater righteousness 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. Jesus has already commended those who hunger and thirst for righteousness, but to be *persecuted* for achieving that end seems like an even greater injustice. However, Jesus appears to be setting up his disciples for what comes 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 have 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 with him to eternal life and share in his glory for all eternity.