

Fourth Sunday of Ordinary Time
Zeph. 2.3, 3.12-13, 1 Cor. 1.26-31, Mt. 5.1-12

All three of today's readings point to humility. The First reading is from the Prophet Zephaniah. A prophet is someone sent by God to guide the people of the Old Covenant in the hope of salvation, to deliver God's messages regarding the consequences of sin and to encourage sinners before it was too late. Zephaniah specifically states that man should "seek the Lord, all you **humble of the earth**, who have observed his law ; seek justice, seek humility; perhaps you may be sheltered on the day of the Lords' anger." The humble or people of the poor, refers to those Israelites who remained faithful and hopeful as they waited for the coming Messiah.

Today's Gospel from St. Matthew is the beginning of the Sermon on the Mount, Mt. 5-7, specifically the Beatitudes. Many books have been written just about the Beatitudes alone. There are several key parts of this part of scripture which are often overlooked. First, Jesus went **up** the mountain. Think back to the Old Testament, Moses came **down** Mt. Sinai with the Ten Commandments which he received from God. A mistake which is often made is to think that the Beatitudes are to replace the Ten Commandments, they are **NOT!** The Beatitudes are a way of life or more directly the Beatitudes fulfill God's promise to Abraham and the Chosen People; it directed them to the true promised land, the Kingdom of Heaven.

Jesus sat down and the disciples (those who chose to follow Jesus) came to Him. In the Jewish culture the teacher or one of highest honor would sit slightly higher than the disciples or students. The disciples then would surround the Master to receive the teaching. Jesus began to teach, "he opened his mouth" (Mt. 5.2). God is no longer using the prophets; God Himself, the Word, is now speaking directly to man. St Thomas Aquinas states that this, "signifies that he had been silent for a long time before. And it shows that the sermon was going to be great and long" (chapters 5-7).

In the Sermon on the Mount Jesus, the greatest teacher, uses the word blessed to refer to a divine promise or reward. The word blessed has a divine element in it. The word beatitude comes from the Latin word 'beatitudo' meaning blessed. The beatitudes are a way of living harmoniously before God. To achieve this harmony, we still must follow the Ten Commandments.

The Israelites had experienced many trials and tribulations. The first beatitude, "Blessed are the poor in spirit, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven," the kingdom belongs to the poor in spirit, those who receive the Word of God with humility. Jesus is not saying that the wealthy cannot enter heaven. St Gregory of Nyssa equated poverty in spirit with humility. St Thomas Aquinas states that "**in spirit**, can be read in three ways. For the pride of man is sometimes called the spirit. And pride is called spirit because as breath inflates a bag, so pride inflates men. Therefore, **blessed are the poor**, namely those who have little of the spirit of pride. Remember pride is one of the deadly sins, this is conquered by the virtue of humility.

Jesus continues in His teaching of the beatitudes with, “blessed are those who **mourn**.” This includes those who suffer out of love for others afflicted by sin and their separation from God. “Blessed are the **meek**,” those who seek to imitate Christ by showing kindness and gentleness to their neighbors. “**Blessed are those who hunger and thirst for righteousness**,” are those who have a sense of urgency both to live the Gospel and to spread it to others. “Blessed are the **merciful**,” those who are compassionate to the suffering, defects, and needs of others. They assist the suffering and are always ready to overlook and forgive the faults and offenses of others. “Blessed are the **pure in heart**,” are those who align their wills and minds with God’s. They give special emphasis to chastity as a liberating virtue that leads to contemplative prayer. “**Blessed are the peacemakers**,” these are those people who not only seek their own reconciliation with God and neighbor, but they also seek to help others reconcile and instill peace in relationships. “**Blessed are the persecuted**,” those true disciples who persevere in the faith and suffer for their faithfulness to Christ. “**Blessed are you when they insult and persecute you and utter every kind of evil against you**,” Jesus Christ is the example of perfection, Jesus is offering us the invitation to follow Him which involves prayer and humility and a willingness to accept self-sacrifice, hardship and persecution.

The Beatitudes embody a radically alternative vision of our society. At our St Vincent de Paul Society meeting this was the meditation question we discussed, “How have you been gently strong and strongly gentle?” I think the heart of the answer to this question lies with the Beatitudes. Jesus the Word of God directs us through the Beatitudes to specific behaviors or virtues which call upon us to imitate Jesus Christ. To be gently strong is to live humbly, to be poor in spirit, to be meek and to be poor in spirit. To live a strongly gentle life is knowing you may be ridiculed, persecuted or insulted for your faith. The beatitudes call us to humbly be strong in our faith, hope and charity. With a humble heart let us seek Jesus Christ by following the Ten Commandments and to live virtuously the Beatitudes.