

4th Sunday in Ordinary Time – Cycle A

Note: Where a Scripture text is underlined in the body of this discussion, it is recommended that the reader look up and read that passage.

1st Reading - Zephaniah 2:3, 3:12-13

Zephaniah (means “Yahweh protects”) is possibly a descendent of King Hezekiah. He prophesied in Josiah’s reign (640-609 B.C.), when there was an attempt, serious but of limited success and duration, to undo the apostasy of Josiah’s predecessor Manasseh who was the son and successor of Hezekiah. Manasseh was the worst of all the kings of Judah; he is credited with the worship of foreign gods, superstition of all kinds, oppression and murder, he was the occasion of the decision of Yahweh to destroy Judah (King Manasseh is summarized in 2 Chronicles 33:1-20).

The first of the writing prophets since Isaiah and Micah, Zephaniah announces the coming of the Day of the Lord, a dread day of catastrophe for all. Judgment Day for the nations ought to be a warning to the chosen people and it should lead them back to repentance, obedience and humility that they so sadly lack and only by which they can survive the divine visitation. A “remnant” however, will be left to enjoy the fruits of salvation.

2:3 Seek the LORD, all you humble of the earth, who have observed his law;

Zephaniah is addressing the righteous oppressed – those who are entirely abandoned to the divine will. Isaiah (61:1) declared that the messiah would be sent to the lowly – the meek who despite adversity would hold fast to justice and humility and would withstand the temptation to adopt as their own the gods of their oppressors.

Seek justice, seek humility; perhaps you may be sheltered on the day of the LORD’S anger. ^{3:12} But I will leave as a remnant in your midst a people humble and lowly, Who shall take refuge in the name of the LORD; ¹³ the remnant of Israel.

The survivors, without earthly possessions, are but a remnant. The chastisement that comes from the Lord always reflects God’s mercy as well.

They shall do no wrong and speak no lies; Nor shall there be found in their mouths a deceitful tongue; They shall pasture and couch their flocks with none to disturb them.

There will be peace. There shall be no lying or deceit; the virtuous, truthful, sincere remnant shall know peace and prosperity.

2nd Reading - 1 Corinthians 1:26-31

The specific needs and circumstances of the Church of Corinth explain why Paul wrote this letter, why it is structured the way it is, why it deals with so many different subjects, and is so clearly pastoral in character. All of the readings during Cycle A deal with divisions among the faithful.

²⁶ Consider your own calling, brothers. Not many of you were wise by human standards, not many were powerful, not many were of noble birth. ²⁷ Rather, God chose the foolish of the world to shame the wise,

“The two most ‘foolish things of the world’ are in particular the virgin birth of Christ and His resurrection from the dead. The wise are confounded because they see that what a few of them deny, the many profess to be true. There is no doubt that the opinions of the many faithful take precedence over those of a small number. Likewise, those who are mighty in this world can easily see the so-called weak things of Christ overturning demons and performing miracles. To the world the injuries and sufferings of the Savior are weak things, because the world does not understand that they have become the source of power through Christ who submitted to suffering in order to overcome death.” [The Ambrosiaster (A.D. 366-384), *Commentaries on Thirteen Pauline Epistles* 1 Corinthians 1,27]

and God chose the weak of the world to shame the strong, ²⁸ and God chose the lowly and despised of the world, those who count for nothing, to reduce to nothing those who are something, ²⁹ so that no human being might boast before God.

Few of the educated class in Corinth, few men of authority, few of the aristocracy, have been called to the faith. But God has called the lowly, the poor, the slaves, and – most shocking of all – “those who count for nothing,” the Gentiles. Thus he might destroy the pretensions of all who account themselves as something.

³⁰ It is due to him that you are in Christ Jesus,

From being nonentities the Corinthians are by God’s call and action transformed into a new creation (2 Corinthians 5:17). In Christ, the Christian possesses all that the Greek and Jew yearned for: wisdom, justice, holiness, and redemption.

who became for us wisdom from God, as well as righteousness, sanctification, and redemption, ³¹ so that, as it is written, “Whoever boasts, should boast in the Lord.”

Sanctification is the embodiment of God’s holiness and the dispenser of the Spirit of holiness which is imparted at baptism, the risen Christ has become holiness for us. Christ by His death and resurrection has freed man from slavery to sin, the flesh, the works of the Law, and death.

“Christ was made our sanctification, not so that he might change what he was but that he might sanctify us in the flesh.” [Saint Ambrose of Milan (A.D. 381), *The Holy Spirit* 3,4,26]

Gospel - Matthew 5:1-12a

The Gospel of Matthew draws many parallels between the life of Jesus and the life of Moses. Both have a slaughter of the innocents which they escape; both fast for 40 days (Moses on Mt. Sinai and Jesus in the desert); both have a period of trial (for Moses it is 40 years in the desert, for Jesus it is 40 days in the desert); Moses goes up on the mountain to receive the word of God, Jesus preaches the word of God in his Sermon on the Mount.

¹ When he saw the crowds, he went up the mountain, and after he had sat down, his disciples came to him.

Sitting is the posture of Oriental teachers. Outdoor teaching was a hallmark of Jesus' ministry. A disciple is a learner/pupil and by extension a follower/adherent. At first glance, one might think that only the disciples heard this discourse but the presence of the crowds leads the commentators to believe that the disciples formed an inner ring around Jesus and the crowds formed one or more concentric outer rings.

² He began to teach them, saying:

What follows is a formula common in psalms and Old Testament wisdom literature. A blessing is a bestowal of God's favor. A covenant has associated with it both blessings and curses (woes). Blessings for obeying, and curses for disobedience. Although Matthew doesn't show any curses associated with his eight beatitudes, Luke in his parallel Sermon on the Plain (Luke 6:20-23) has four blessings and four curses. As members of God's covenant people, His family, we are subject both to the blessings and the curses of that covenant. A young child once told Fr. Ken Roberts that if an object had been blessed, that meant that it had been "touched by God". One might try reading these beatitudes and substituting "touched by God" everywhere "blessed" appears in order to get a little deeper meaning.

³ "Blessed are the poor in spirit, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven.

The religious concept of poverty was deeply rooted in the Old Testament; as our first reading showed. It has more to do with a religious attitude of neediness and humility toward God than material poverty. The religious attitude of poverty is closely related to what is called "spiritual childhood." A Christian sees himself as a little child in the presence of God, a child who owns nothing: everything he has comes from God and belongs to God

⁴ Blessed are they who mourn, for they will be comforted.

Those who suffer from any kind of affliction – particularly those who are genuinely sorry

for their sins, or are pained by the offenses which others offer God, and who bear their suffering with love and in a spirit of atonement.

5 Blessed are the meek, for they will inherit the land.

Those who patiently suffer unjust persecution; those who remain serene, humble and steadfast in adversity, and do not give way to resentment or discouragement. Usually irritableness stems from a lack of humility and interior peace. The “land” is usually understood as meaning our heavenly fatherland.

6 Blessed are they who hunger and thirst for righteousness, for they will be satisfied.

A righteous person is one who sincerely strives to do the will of God, which is discovered in the commandments, in one’s duties of state in life, and through one’s life of prayer.

7 Blessed are the merciful, for they will be shown mercy.

Mercy is not just a matter of giving alms to the poor but also of being understanding toward other people’s defects, overlooking them, helping them cope with them and loving them despite whatever defects they may have. Being merciful also means rejoicing and suffering with other people.

8 Blessed are the clean of heart, for they will see God.

Christ teaches us that the source of the quality of human acts lies in the heart, that is, in a man’s soul, in the depths of his spirit. Cleanliness of heart is a gift of God, which expresses itself in a capacity to love, in having an upright and pure attitude to everything noble. Helped by God’s grace, a Christian should constantly strive to cleanse his heart and acquire this purity, whose reward is the vision of God.

9 Blessed are the peacemakers, for they will be called children of God.

Those who foster peace, in themselves and in others and, as a basis for that, try to be reconciled and to reconcile others with God. Look at the glorious blessing! 1 John 3:1; Romans 8:14-17. Such a reward!

10 Blessed are they who are persecuted for the sake of righteousness, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven.

Blessed is he who suffers persecution for being true to Jesus Christ and who does so not only patiently but joyfully. Circumstances arise in a Christian’s life that call for heroism – where no compromise is admissible: either one stays true to Jesus Christ whatever the cost in terms of reputation, life or possessions, or one denies Him. Every Christian who is faithful to Jesus’ teaching is in fact a “martyr” (a witness) who reflects or acts in accordance with this beatitude, even if he does not undergo physical suffering and/or death.

11 Blessed are you when they insult you and persecute you and utter every kind of evil against you (falsely) because of me.

There are only eight beatitudes, this is an elaboration of the preceding one.

12 Rejoice and be glad, for your reward will be great in heaven.

The last two verses are a summary of the eight beatitudes; an invitation to put this teaching into practice. The Christian life is no easy matter, but it is worthwhile, given the reward Jesus promises.

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