

Fourth Sunday in Ordinary Time—Year A
“Living the Beatitudes, Living for the Glory of God”

Through the Words of the Gospel, May Our Sins be Wiped Away

Holy Spirit, Help Me to Preach with Great Clarity and Great Charity

When he was nine years old, Giovanni had a dream in which he was surrounded by a mob of fighting and swearing children whom he tried in vain to pacify. Frustrated when he was unable to do so, a mysterious woman then appeared to him and told him, “Take your shepherd’s staff and lead them to pasture.” From that moment on, Giovanni clearly knew it was his duty to lead and help other boys. He matured, was ordained to the priesthood, and despite what sometimes appeared to be insurmountable obstacles, spent the rest of his life assisting boys and young men to pursue lives of holiness. Giovanni did so, as he tells us, *“All for God and for His Glory. In whatever you do, think of the Glory of God as your main goal.”*

Today, the prophet Zephaniah brings to our awareness the fact that Christianity is not a passive faith. By exhorting each of us to seek justice, to seek humility, to seek the Lord, he makes clear that our faith calls us to actively pursue holiness. When we do so with sincere hearts, the Lord gives sight to the blindness which is our ignorance and sets us free through His grace from captivity to our sin.

But what exactly does such a life of holiness look like? How can we know that we’re on the narrow path to heaven? This is exactly the knowledge that Jesus gives us in today’s Gospel. His Sermon on the Mount focuses our attention on how

to live a life of Christian discipleship and morality. Jesus gives us the beatitudes, which are nothing less than a spiritual profile of Jesus Himself, a description of the way He lived, and the way we can imitate Him. Pope Francis tells us that the beatitudes make up, “...*the path of holiness, and it is the same path of happiness. It is the path Jesus has taken; indeed, Jesus Himself is this path.*”

Our happiness results from the realization of what we have through Holy Mother Church—Jesus Christ in person and the hope of eternal life with Him. As Catholics we have access to the vaults of heaven because Jesus Christ gives us Himself in His Word and in His Sacraments, most especially the Most Holy Eucharist. We spread the joy of our faith and naturally create the desire for others to belong when we live the beatitudes. Blessed means happy, and Jesus is about to teach us how to attain what is at the center of every human heart—the desire to be happy. The beatitudes are the secret of happiness, and a description of what true happiness really is. So let’s spend some time learning how Jesus Himself teaches us to be happy and draw those around us to His one true Church.

By making us aware that “...*he went up the mountain...*” to teach the beatitudes, Jesus wants us to understand that the new law He is about to give is ordered toward attaining the Kingdom of Heaven. Everything that He will teach during the next three years of His life will be centered on the beatitudes, and the beatitudes *will give life* to all His teaching. The Kingdom of Heaven frames

everything Jesus is saying, and to follow the beatitudes is to inherit the world to come. In the beautiful and encouraging words of St. Chromatius of Aquileia, *“Our Lord, Our Savior, establishes extremely solid steps of precious stones, by which saintly souls and faithful can climb, can rise to this supreme good, which is the kingdom of heaven.... Brethren, before your eyes are the eight rungs of the gospel, constructed, as I have said, with precious stones. Behold Jacob’s ladder which starts on earth and whose top touches heaven. He who climbs it finds the gate of heaven, and having entered it, will have endless joy in the presence of the Lord, eternally praising Him with the Holy angels.”*

To begin climbing Jacob’s ladder, *“Blessed are the poor in spirit...”*. To be poor in spirit is to be humble enough to recognize that I am not the center of my existence, God is, and I am dependent upon Him in all things. Everything I think, say, and do should be geared to living in His divine will for my life and bringing Him glory. Thus, we recognize that material things are good in themselves, but not as ends for which we should strive. Material possessions—money, homes, cars, clothes, electronics, and anything else we can possess—are only fleeting and have no eternal value other than the way in which we use them for God’s glory. Our happiness begins when we detach from the things of this world and choose to attach ourselves to Jesus Christ instead. Then we are on our way to the kingdom of heaven.

Once we embrace spiritual poverty, “*Blessed are those who mourn...*”. We lament our sinfulness and the suffering we have caused because of it. We mourn over the way we have allowed the sins to which we have become attached to separate us from God and from becoming the people He created us to be. Such mourning should move us to repentance and to work to detach ourselves from this sin in obedience to Jesus Christ. The reward for our remorse and repentance is being comforted, having an inner affirmation of being forgiven by our merciful Redeemer.

The third rung of our Jacob’s Ladder, “*Blessed are the meek...*”. The meek are those who overcome their ego and their tendency to act selfishly, always in their own best interest. To be meek is to detach from self, choosing humbly to be like Jesus and to seek and follow His divine will for our lives. In a particular way, the meek become gentle and patient with others, never seeking retaliation for the wrongs others commit against them, but always seeking justice in a Christlike manner. When we can let go of ourselves as the center of the universe and trust in God’s Providence, when we become reservoirs of His grace, we can inherit the earth, working to overcome evil and fashion our world in keeping with God’s desires.

Having surrendered to God, “*Blessed are those who hunger and thirst for righteousness...*”. This is the desire for holiness and justice, always seeking to do right toward God and those we encounter in our daily lives. Jesus promises that if

we respond to and attach ourselves to this inner longing for holiness, we will be satisfied, knowing His peace, and changed by His grace to become more Christlike.

When this happens, we can advance to “*Blessed are the merciful...*”. To be merciful is to love as Christ has loved us, overcoming the bitterness for letting go of what we consider the injustices committed against us by others. It is to forgive even when the one forgiven doesn’t deserve to be forgiven. And the reward for this benevolence is that we in turn receive and experience God’s mercy for the sins we commit, by means of the Sacrament of Confession if necessary.

We now reach the sixth rung on our Jacob’s ladder, “*Blessed are the pure of heart...*”. If we embrace the first five beatitudes, our hearts become changed and purified, and we act with integrity and avoid compromise with the sinful ways of the world. This allows us to establish an intimate union with Christ, more fully open to the promptings of the Holy Spirit and living in a manner pleasing to our God.

Then, “*Blessed are the peacemakers...*” becomes attainable. To be a peacemaker is to become a willing messenger of Jesus in the lives of others, fostering reconciliation with others and between others, and helping others to grow closer to Jesus themselves. People might recognize us as indeed “*sons of God*” and be moved by our good works to give glory to God and seek to emulate us.

We reach, then, the last rung on our ladder, “*Blessed are those who are persecuted for righteousness’ sake...*”. By God’s grace, we become willing to accept the suffering that comes from defending the truth, the truths of our faith and the teachings of Holy Mother Church. We become signs of contradiction and join the faithful who have gone before us as the foolish, the weak, the lowly and the despised in the eyes of those who don’t know our Lord. Bearing witness to Jesus Christ, we accept this rejection as nothing more than what is to be expected and accepted as a follower of Christ.

This then is the new law given to us by our Lord. It does not abolish the old law, but instead fulfills it. Because if we humbly and willingly detach ourselves, aided by grace, from the world, from sin, from self, hungering and thirsting instead for righteousness, and living this out in mercy toward others; if we strive for purity of heart, become Jesus’ messengers, and are shunned for doing so; then we can be assured that we are living within God’s will and honoring His Ten Commandments.

The beatitudes are the Christian pilgrim way of life. Through them Jesus helps us to understand that the way we enter His kingdom is through the Cross. When you accept the beatitudes, you begin to die to yourself, and you begin to challenge the spirit of the world. Evil comes from our hearts, and the beatitudes help us to overcome this evil and set our hearts on heaven’s treasures. When we embrace the beatitudes, we speak the truth and to speak the truth is to be politically incorrect. We

witness to the truths of our faith at every moment. And, as Robert Cardinal Sarah tells us, we always do so joyfully, *“A Christian heart is always a happy heart. I am not saying that a Christian is permanently cheerful. I know how severely suffering, fatigue, and persecution can afflict us sometimes.... But no one can steal from us our profound, supernatural joy, for it does not come from us, nor from our success in the world. Our joy comes from Jesus, the Incarnate Word, the Savior.”*

Giovanni was truly a man of the beatitudes. As a priest, he built homes, youth centers and churches for the benefit of thousands of boys and young men in Italy and across the continent of South America; he established workshops to give young men skills needed to be successful in life; he founded a new religious society, the Order of Salesians, dedicated to working for the benefit of poor boys; and he founded an order of women to do for poor girls what the Salesians were doing for boys. In doing so, Giovanni was constantly confronted by people and circumstances which tried to prevent him from his holy work. But he knew this was all part-and-parcel of following the beatitudes, and joyfully encourages us today with his words, *“Your reward in heaven will make up completely for all your pain and suffering.”* Through the intercession of Giovanni Melchior Bosco, St. John Bosco, may we embrace the beatitudes, may we strive to live them to their fullest, and when we stand before our Lord, may we hear Him proclaim to each of us, *“Rejoice and be glad, for your reward will be great in heaven.”*