

January 29

FOURTH SUNDAY OF THE YEAR

Reading 1 ZEP 2:3; 3:12-13

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 LORD's anger. 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: the remnant of Israel. 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.

Responsorial Psalm PS 146:6-7, 8-9, 9-10

R. (Mt 5:3) **Blessed the poor in spirit; the kingdom of heaven is theirs!**

or:

R. **Alleluia.**

The LORD keeps faith forever,
secures justice for the oppressed,
gives food to the hungry.

The LORD sets captives free.

R. **Blessed the poor in spirit; the kingdom of heaven is theirs!**

or:

R. **Alleluia.**

The LORD gives sight to the blind;
the LORD raises up those who were bowed down.

The LORD loves the just;

the LORD protects strangers.

R. **Blessed the poor in spirit; the kingdom of heaven is theirs!**

or:

R. **Alleluia.**

The fatherless and the widow the LORD sustains,
but the way of the wicked he thwarts.

The LORD shall reign forever;

your God, O Zion, through all generations. Alleluia.

R. **Blessed the poor in spirit; the kingdom of heaven is theirs!**

or:

R. **Alleluia.**

Reading 2 1 COR 1:26-31

Consider your own calling, brothers and sisters. Not many of you were wise by human standards, not many were powerful, not many were of noble birth. Rather, God chose the foolish of the world to shame the wise, and God chose the weak of the world to shame the strong, and God chose the lowly and despised of the world, those who count for nothing, to reduce to nothing those who are something, so that no human being might boast before God. It is due to him that you are in Christ Jesus, who became for us wisdom from God, as well as righteousness, sanctification, and redemption, so that, as it is written, "Whoever boasts, should boast in the Lord."

Alleluia MT 5:12A

R. **Alleluia, alleluia.**

Rejoice and be glad;
your reward will be great in heaven.

R. **Alleluia, alleluia.**

Gospel MT 5:1-12A

When Jesus saw the crowds, he went up the mountain, and after he had sat down, his disciples came to him. He began to teach them, saying: "Blessed are the poor in spirit, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven. Blessed are they who mourn, for they will be comforted. Blessed are the meek, for they will inherit the land. Blessed are they who hunger and thirst for righteousness, for they will be satisfied. Blessed are the merciful, for they will be shown mercy. Blessed are the clean of heart, for they will see God. Blessed are the peacemakers, for they will be called children of God. Blessed are they who are persecuted for the sake of righteousness, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven. Blessed are you when they insult you and persecute you and utter every kind of evil against you falsely because of me. Rejoice and be glad, for your reward will be great in heaven."

Reflection:

TODAY WE BEGIN the Sermon on the Mount. In Matthew's gospel, Jesus is presented as the new Moses. He presents five long discourses by Jesus, which can be seen to match the Pentateuch, the five first books of the Bible, traditionally attributed to Moses as their author and which embody the Jewish Law. Just as the Pentateuch embodies the Jewish way of life, so these discourses embody Jesus' vision of the life he proposes for us. The Sermon on Mount is the first of these five discourses. It is not a tape recording or a verbatim record of an actual sermon or address. Rather, it is a collection of sayings and teachings focusing on the personal qualities expected of a disciple of Jesus. It is given on a mountain. Mountains are traditionally seen as holy places where God is especially present and there are several instances in both the Hebrew and Christian Testaments where mountains feature in a significant way. Apart from today's example, we have, to give just two examples, Mount Sinai where God gave the Law to Moses and the Transfiguration where something of Jesus' inner reality was revealed to three chosen disciples. Jesus sat down, a position of authority, e.g. when the Pope speaks officially, he does so *ex cathedra*, sitting on his chair or throne. His audience consists of the Twelve, his other disciples and all those who wish to hear what he says. ***The core of Christian living*** Just as the Ten Commandments are the core of the Jewish way of life and a law to follow, so Beatitudes are the core of the Christian way of life. Yet, they are often not understood as such. In many ways, they are largely ignored as guides to Christian living and many Christians still regard the Ten Commandments as their life guide. (I have yet to hear anyone refer to the Beatitudes in making their 'confessions'!) However, there are major differences between the Commandments and the Beatitudes. In a literal sense at least, the Commandments are fairly easy to keep. And, what is very significant as far as the Gospel is concerned, they can be observed without love. They can be kept in a very selfish, self-centred way. This was perhaps the problem of the rich man who said he kept the Commandments since he was young but could not bring himself to share his wealth with the poor. This was surely a failure in love for the neighbour. And so he could not become a disciple of Jesus. In the society where Jesus grew up, a good person was understood as one who kept the Law perfectly. In fact, many of them can be kept by not doing anything at all e.g. not stealing, not being violent, not doing any sexual acts, not talking about other people... A highly introverted, narrow-minded Puritan might very well be observing the Commandments to the letter. And this was where the conflict arose between Jesus and the Scribes and Pharisees. Strictly speaking, the Beatitudes are not commandments. They are not so much things to be done or rules to be kept as deep-down attitudes of mind. And, in fact, their observance is only possible with a deep love of God and of other people. They can never be kept fully -- they are goals that are always calling us further. They never leave any room for complacency. One can never say about the Beatitudes what the rich man said to Jesus, namely, that he had kept all the commandments since he was young.

Each Beatitude begins with the word "Blessed". 'Blessed' is a translation of the Greek *makarios*, and the Latin *felix*. The meaning of these words is a combination of happiness and good fortune. So we could translate either with "Happy are those..." or "Fortunate are those..." The Beatitudes must be understood in the context of the Kingdom. The Kingdom, as we said on a previous Sunday, is not a place. It is that complex of relationships that exists between God and those who have totally accepted him as the Lord and guide of their lives and who share God's vision of what life is about. So, in the Kingdom it is not the rich, the successful and the powerful who are really happy and fortunate but the meek and lowly. Clearly that is not the conventional way of thinking for many in our world. And that is why to enter the Kingdom requires *metanoia*, a radical change in the way we see life and its values. This point is made forcefully by Paul in today's Second Reading. "*God chose what is foolish in the world to shame the wise; God chose what is weak in the world to shame the strong; God chose what is low and despised in the world, things that are not, to reduce to nothing things that are, so that no one might boast in the presence of God.*" It is also made in the First Reading. "*Seek the Lord, all you humble of the land, who do his commands; seek righteousness, seek humility... For I will leave in the midst of you a people humble and lowly... They shall do no wrong and utter no lies, nor shall a deceitful tongue be found in their mouths.*" The Beatitudes have a quality and depth which goes far beyond the mere moral requirements of the Ten Commandments. They call for a very special relationship with God and with the people around us. They involve not merely a personal observance of some ethical rules but a deep concern to be involved in the building up of the world we live in, helping to make it a place of truth, love, compassion, justice, freedom and peace. This is what the Kingdom is all about. It is a completely different ball game. Am I ready for it?