

020308 4th Sunday in OT

Blessings. Dear brothers and sisters... peace be with you. A while back, I happened upon a little piece of writing called, "The Devil's Property." I'd like to share a little bit of it with you and then reflect a little about how we can apply it to today's Gospel...

In a European country, an atheist died and in his will, he bequeathed his farm to the devil. His will was studied by the courts, and it was decided that the way to carry out the provisions would be to leave the farm untouched by human hands. After years and years, the farm was overgrown with brush, the buildings had begun to tumble, and the whole place presented a scene of desolation and ugliness. That's the way property looks when Satan owns it. Such can happen in churches if the people are not people of God. Such can happen in families if they are not fully functioning, grace-activated believers.

If someone here was a painter, you could construct a two- scene image. On one extreme side of a canvas – we have death... consider it a death of spirit... and it is followed by an end of human contact... no loving... no touching, no caring. Emptiness and ugliness... This is what it looks like in a landscape devoid of God's Spirit life in humans.

And now – on the other side of the portrait, let us consider what Beatitude might look like. And to do that, let me use an example from my own recent experiences.

Once you hear where I am going with this, you too might be able to narrate or paint your own Beatitude experiences.

Some years ago, my wife and I invited a young family to have dinner with us and to visit in our home. My wife and I knew the father – but had never spent any time with his wife or children. We quickly found out they were prayerful, holy and respecting of one another. We were so surprised to learn that their young ten-year old son was considering going to a month-long summer camp to be with other young boys and to study whether he might have a vocation to the priesthood later in his life. And this boy wasn't boring or some sort of a wallflower. He willingly led us in grace before our meal. He also is an inveterate joke teller... he told us jokes and then wouldn't stop pestering me till I told him a joke so he could add it to his own collection.

I love young families. And at the Masses in our parish following that dinner visit, I looked at some of the young families in our parish where we were living. I noticed young families where children came up with folded arms for a blessing because they were too young to receive the Eucharist. You can claim me old fashioned... wanting to invoke the old days and old ways... but it seems to me these sorts of families that you see or can picture – they are being led by the Spirit. And while none of our families claims perfection, the ones I am talking about -- more often there is charity, joy and peace, patience, understanding of others, kindness and fidelity, gentleness and self-control. These are the fruit of the Holy Spirit.

Where the Spirit does not lead families, there aren't many joyful family meals... there can be impatience, frustration, anger, lack of respect. And sometimes much worse – Paul wrote about this in Galatians. But there is hope and guidance.

In the Gospel today, Jesus gave us the roadmap to family life and relationships with non-family members... they are called the Beatitudes, and I'll say a few words about them in a minute. But first – let's look at the setting in which this mountaintop experience takes place.

Just ahead of what was read today from Matthew's Gospel, Jesus begins his ministry. He calls his first disciples and goes around all of Galilee, teaching in their synagogues, proclaiming the Gospel and curing disease and illness. Jesus proclaims the arrival of the Kingdom of God, meaning God's saving presence is among them.

Jesus begins to have the attention of the multitudes – and he takes a position on the mountain. Notice this – God is always thought to speak to the Jewish people from on high. Jesus ascends and is ready to explain to them how to be happy. To them, blessedness means 'happy.' As in 'happy is the one who has a long life and material prosperity.'

To best demonstrate this, let me give you a scene from one of my favorite movies. A movie I wish many of us could get together and watch and then talk about... it's Fiddler on the Roof.

Do you remember Tevye? He was the main character played by Topel. Can you picture him in that movie? In one scene, he walks along the dirt path leading his single cow back to the barn. And Tevye is speaking to God.... "Would it spoil some eternal plan, if you would make me a rich man?" (If I were a rich man...) That's the way the Jewish people thought of God's blessedness...

The teachings of Jesus came to them as a total surprise. Jesus took away the focus on what men "have," refocusing it on what men "are." He described to them an excellence of life that was impossible to achieve without the indwelling of the Holy Spirit.

Be merciful to others who have not attained your maturity... or your level of education... your experience... your good fortune... Be meek – do not lord it over others that you have more status or income... To those who struggle with pornography, be clean of heart and you will indeed see the face of God.

And the one Beatitude that is the deepest – the one that has the most for us to meditate upon is the one that has these words "Blessed are they who hunger and thirst for righteousness... for they will be satisfied." Righteousness – that holiness and the in-dwelling of God's Spirit in us. You and I can want to be more loving and merciful... but those words that say we should hunger and thirst... in human beings, there is nothing more powerful ... more compelling than unsatisfied hunger or thirst.

Do we hunger to be morally upright and virtuous? Do we want God's holiness to descend upon our families? It will take change – it will take sacrifice. Sacrifice means dying to selves and emptying ourselves, in order to be life giving to each other many times a day. As bread is broken and blood is poured out, so do we allow ourselves to become a source of nourishment to members of our family or friends.

If this blessedness 'stuff' sounds a long way from where you are or where you would like to be – I am here to attest to you that many years ago, I too was in a mostly God-less place in my life. So it also was in our marriage. Some day I will share a part of that journey – a journey now manifest in daily prayer with my wife, a loving relationship – only occasionally marred by human frailty... And for tools of this transformation, I would say that the Mass, the Eucharist, the Sacrament of Reconciliation (Confession) and being active in the faith and the Church – these have helped to bring about beatitude in our lives.

You and I are about to enter the season of Lent. Would you consider making it a journey into your own desert – seeking beatitude that only God can provide? The only condition... you must hunger and thirst for it!

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!
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!
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!
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!

Reading II

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."

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."