

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.”

Background:

Last week Jesus learned of the arrest of John the Baptist and moved from the small town of Nazareth to Capernaum, which was located on major trade routes, to begin his ministry of preaching and curing the sick. He also called his first disciples: Peter, his brother Andrew, and the two brothers James and John. In the two verses between last week’s text and the gospel for this week, Matthew states that Jesus’ fame had spread throughout Syria and people were bringing their sick to him.

In the gospel for this week, Jesus begins his instruction to his disciples. (For the next six weeks, the gospel text will be taken from Jesus’ instruction to his new disciples.) Jesus expects the disciples to learn from him and to shape their lives by his teachings. As Matthew describes Jesus’ instruction to his followers, he is drawing on his community’s familiarity with Moses, who went up the mountain and brought back the commandments from God. Here, Jesus takes his disciples up the mountain and sits with them, assuming the position of a teacher. But he is not laying down a new set of commandments, rather he is teaching in the tradition of a wisdom teacher.

Each of the Beatitudes begins with same, “Blessed are...” Because there is not one word that adequately translates the Hebrew or Greek, there is a need to understand what is being expressed here with each of the beatitudes. First, the Beatitudes are not just simple statements. Nor are they statements of hope about the future when the fullness of the Kingdom of God is established, or about that day when one becomes fully present to God. They are explanations about what is in the present. The blessing then is not affected by the other circumstances of life. The blessing described in the beatitudes comes to the disciples out of a profound awareness that Jesus is walking with them. This bond, like the covenant, continues no matter the circumstances the disciple might experience.

The values that Jesus advocates in the beatitudes run contrary to those held by society of his day. Throughout Matthew’s gospel, Jesus is described as the one who is poor in spirit, mourning, meek, hungering for righteousness, merciful, pure of heart, and a peacemaker. These beatitudes look to a future time when God’s presence will be brought to fullness on earth. That future day has begun to appear in the person of Jesus. Jesus teaches his followers, by the example of his own life, how to live their lives reflecting the values of the reign of God. Thus, hope for the reign of God will continue to be present and unfold in the world through his followers.

Reflection Questions:

1. Take a few minutes to think about the early disciples. What strikes you about them?
2. Then what strikes about you about how Jesus interacts with them?
3. Do you think any of the disciples ever thought of themselves as blessed in their here and now, or do you think the disciples were mostly looking for blessing on a day yet to come?
4. Have you ever experienced blessings during a painful period or crisis in your life? What did you learn about God’s presence during those times? What did you learn about your own desires?

5. Who are the people who have reminded you that you are among those blessed by God?
6. How would you like to respond to God as you hear Jesus' instruction to his disciples in this text? Can you take some time to talk to God about your questions, thoughts, and desires?

The gospel background and reflection questions are written by Fr. Paul Gallagher, OFM. They are edited by Sister Anne Marie Lom, OSF and Joe Thiel. The excerpts from the Sunday readings are prepared by Joe Thiel. To be added to the distribution list, send your name and email address to annemarie.lom@gmail.com

Our Gospel Reflections are hosted by the Franciscan Sisters of Christian Charity. Their homepage is <https://fscclom.org/>. One link there is labeled Franciscan Gospel Reflections. A click on the icon will take you to the Gospel reflections for the upcoming Sunday. By following this link, you will be able to blog or comment on the reflection questions. The material will be posted on Fridays and will be available until the following Friday when the new material is posted.

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Excerpts from the readings for January 29, 2023, the Fourth Sunday in Ordinary Time

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.

*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.
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.
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.*

Consider your own calling. 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
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, righteousness, sanctification, and redemption,
so that, as it is written, "Whoever boasts, should boast in the Lord."

When Jesus saw the crowds, he went up the mountain,
and 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 evil against you falsely because of me.
Rejoice and be glad, for your reward will be great in heaven."

Excerpts from Zephaniah 2:3; 3:12-13; Psalm 146:6-10; 1 Corinthians 1:26-31; and Matthew 5:1-12

Friends,

Here are the gospel background and reflection questions for January 29th, as prepared by Franciscan spiritual director Fr. Paul Gallagher. In the gospel from Matthew, Jesus begins his teaching to the crowds that have gathered, at the start of the Sermon on the Mount, starting with the beatitudes: "Blessed are the poor in spirit... the merciful... the peacemakers... they who are persecuted for the sake of righteousness. Rejoice and be glad, for your reward will be great in heaven."

The other readings also have references to humility, justice, and righteousness. In the first reading, from Zephaniah, the Lord says, "Seek the Lord, all you humble of the earth, who have observed his law; seek justice, seek humility. I will leave as a remnant in your midst a people humble and lowly." Psalm 146 proclaims, "The Lord raises up those who were bowed down. The Lord loves the just." The second reading is again from the first letter to the Corinthians, where Paul writes, "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."

In the past three weeks, our Sunday gospels have related three different stories where Jesus was revealed as the savior: first on Epiphany, in Bethlehem, by the Magi; then at the Jordan, by John the Baptist, during his ministry there; and then last Sunday, in Galilee, by Jesus himself, as he began his preaching, saying, "Repent, for the kingdom of heaven is at hand," and also as he called his first followers from their fishing boats on the shore of the Sea of Galilee. Matthew describes in three verses at the end of chapter 4 the rapid transition, from the calling of the four fishermen to the gathering of great crowds of followers, as word spreads fast and far and wide about Jesus' healings and cures, as he begins his ministry. This week we begin to hear in great depth, in Jesus' own words, the message that Jesus has for his fast-growing accumulation of followers. He starts with the beatitudes, which we hear in today's gospel. From now until Lent begins, our Sunday gospels will continue through Matthew's chapter 5, the first of the three chapters that make up Jesus' Sermon on the Mount.

Joe