

January 29, 2023 – Fourth Sunday in Ordinary Time
Attitudes of Being
Gospel of Matthew 5:1-12
Fr. John

The teachings of Jesus as we find them in the Gospel of St. Matthew are neatly compacted in the Sermon on the Mount and are commonly referred to as the Beatitudes. Each begins with the word, 'Blessed'. The gospel of St. Luke's more summarized version uses the word, 'happy', rather than 'blessed'.

But whether we use the word 'blessed' or 'happy', it's not easy to give a positive spin to these, 'beatitudes'. They don't seem to exude much hope for either success or happiness...at least not initially.

To those who view happiness and success in a more worldly manner, they would almost be seen as directives for losers and describe the formula for religion [as expressed by the atheist philosopher Frederick Nietzsche] as 'pie in the sky when you die'.

However, perhaps we need to unpack them a little more carefully.

Blessed are the poor in spirit doesn't necessarily refer to economic poverty and certainly not to an impoverished spiritual life. Rather, 'being poor in spirit' refers to the gift of humility - knowing and accepting what and who we really are [warts and all] and being grateful to God for all that we are. It is the gift of simplicity and joy that comes from the kind of openness possessed by a small child who delights in what adults often overlook.

Blessed are those who mourn doesn't necessarily refer to one who always goes about sad-faced and despondent, but rather one who feels and expresses empathy for another human being and is willing to walk along side them through difficult and even tragic experiences.

Blessed are the meek. Often meekness is understood only in terms of being overly submissive and being a doormat for others to trample on. But true meekness is the quality of being patient and having a willingness to really listen without volunteering a quick response or a cliché answer. As the old saying goes - that's why God gave us two ears and only one mouth. If more of us would take the time to really listen to each other, what a different world it would be!

Blessed are those who hunger and thirst for righteousness. We have all had the experience of being physically hungry or thirsty at one time or another. Fasting from food and drink makes us appreciate even more the blessings and privileges that we often take for granted. How much more should we yearn and work for justice in our world.

Blessed are the merciful. How often do we hear the pejorative term 'bleeding heart' in reference to those extending mercy. We would often desire to exact vengeance on those we perceive to be our enemies. And yet most so-called enemies can be disarmed by unexpected mercy than by expected vengeance.

Blessed are the pure in heart. Didn't Jesus say that unless we have the heart of a small child, we couldn't enter the kingdom of heaven? A small child often seems closer to God in appreciating the simple joys of life. We need to savour living in the present moment rather than reliving the past or fearing about the future.

Blessed are the peacemakers. It seems no matter what sport you might follow, the people that are always booed are the referees. Peacemakers, in their turn, are like wise targeted by both opposing sides whether in sports, politics, or war. Indeed blessed are those who risk health, reputation, and even life itself to be mediators.

Blessed are those who are persecuted for righteousness sake. None of us desires to go out of our way to be persecuted. Most of the martyrs we honour in our faith tradition did not seek suffering or death [otherwise they would simply be masochists]. No - they were willing to suffer the consequences of speaking out and working to make a better world. Being a prophet, in the biblical sense had little to do with foretelling the future but rather speaking openly and honestly of a present situation and seeking truth.

So the Beatitudes are not for 'wimps' or 'losers' but rather a blueprint for living a whole and integrated life as a mature human being which Jesus modelled so perfectly.

We are called to be a 'be-attitude people' developing attitudes of being fully human, fully alive, and fully holy.

It would seem [as St. Paul sums it up in today's second reading to the Corinthians] that God takes so-called human wisdom and turns it upside down to become Divine wisdom so that anyone who boasts - will boast in the Lord!