

Fourth Sunday in Ordinary Time – Year A

There is a message in today's readings about accepting difference – in others, but also in ourselves. Seeing richness in the most unlikely places enables the perceptive spirit to rejoice in difference.

Zephaniah 2:3; 3:12-13 Zephaniah prophesied in Jerusalem during the reign of King Josiah. He was appalled at the worship of other gods that had been allowed to flourish under the two previous kings Amon and Manasseh and warned that divine punishment was inevitable if this idolatry was not stamped out.

Today's reading is a call to the lowly and the righteous to seek out the Lord. The prophet warns that there is retribution ahead for the arrogant but the 'good guys' may escape the future punishment. There is a theme that runs through the Prophets, the Psalms and the Dead Sea Scrolls as well that God favours the lowly and the disadvantaged. It is because they are not inclined to arrogance. They are too busy working to survive and feed their families and are not in the business of amassing wealth and ripping off others.

The prophet is describing an ideal future for the land in which the people will turn to God and be mindful of each other in justice and integrity. These people will be the honest battlers who do no wrong. They will be known by their commitment to following the way of the Lord.

Psalms 145/146 This psalm sings of the benevolence of the Creator who favours the honest people of the earth who lead lives of goodness and justice. The Lord comforts the gracious who seek wholeness through a life of decency. The Lord also leaves the wicked to their own devices, but is always ready to smile on those who 'come back to me with all their heart.'

The Lord is the supreme protector of the helpless and the nameless

There is a universal outlook in this psalm in which the Divine Presence is portrayed as embracing the stranger, the orphan and the widow. This is a Hebrew expression of respect for the foreigner, the one who 'is not like me'. It encourages us to be big-hearted in our approach to difference. The psalmist is urging us to be mindful of the widow, that is, the disadvantaged, the victim of prejudice, violence or disregard; and to look kindly on the orphan. Orphans were seen as being particularly needy because they had no family or birthright, and in a culture that prized genealogy and heritage this was a serious disadvantage. The psalm hails the Lord as the supreme protector of the helpless and the nameless.

1 Corinthians 1:26-31 Paul reminds the Christians of Corinth that their call to belong to Jesus Christ was not given to them because of their standing in human society or because of their wealth or influence. God chooses all manner of people regardless of their status. All one has to do is respond to the call in faith and goodwill. We can see that this text was chosen because of its thematic connection to the previous two readings.

Paul will go on in the following verses to develop his theme of equality and the acceptance of difference in light of the fact that divisions had arisen in the community. Tensions had occurred between rich and poor, highborn and commoners, slave and free, and Paul wrote to say that those truly committed to Christ are not driven by prejudice, but respect each other and take no account of differences. Throughout this letter Paul urges the Corinthians to be united as a single body – the body of Christ.

Matthew 5:1-12 These verses begin the section of his Gospel where Matthew has drawn together the principal gems of the teachings of Jesus. St Augustine called these chapters (5, 6 and 7) the Sermon on the Mount, which is a little unfortunate since they do not constitute a sermon. No first-century Aramaic speaker addressing ordinary folk would serve up so many different ideas in one sitting. But Matthew has gathered them together in one literary setting. Speakers generally interacted with their audience and engaged in Q & A as well as explanatory responses to comments and interjections from the listeners.

This little fact alone can tell us how the shape of our liturgies will change dramatically the day we introduce interactive homilies. People will stand to get much more out of the sermon/homily when they can ask questions and comment on what is presented by the preacher. We will also see a different level of preparation by the clergy when their ideas come under scrutiny.

Many Bible versions introduce each Beatitude with the word 'Happy' and here is another misleading translation. Many of us may not be aware that the Old Testament is virtually saturated with beatitudes. The Psalms and Wisdom books in particular pronounce 'blessing' on those who walk in the way of the Lord. The Hebrew beatitudes begin with the word *'ashrei*, which actually means 'straight, right, honourable'. The Aramaic equivalent of *'ashrei* is *touv*, which means 'good, right, honourable'. So Jesus is saying, 'It is a good and honourable thing to...'

If we look at the second Beatitude in Matthew 5, 'Blessed are those who mourn, for they shall be comforted,' we can appreciate that 'happy' does not fit. Jesus is really saying that it is a good and honourable thing to mourn the loss of a loved one. The mourner has loved, has had a precious relationship with the deceased. The mourner's sorrow stems from the sadness of a terminated connection with another human being. This is not a cause for happiness but rather a reassurance from Jesus that mourning is natural and is deeply expressive of a human relationship. It is right and proper to mourn.

Jesus is saying that it is human to be crushed in spirit

The first Beatitude in our reading echoes the sentiment of today's previous readings, namely, God favours the lowly and the downtrodden. An expression that occurs in the Hebrew Scriptures (e.g., Isaiah 57:15) refers to God bringing comfort to the *daka v^eshafal ruakh*: the crushed and broken in spirit. So, Jesus is saying that the crushed or poor in spirit are not disqualified from being part of the reign of God. In other words, it is OK to feel wretched at times, to feel I can't cope; it is OK to feel crushed in spirit.

When the people Jesus is addressing are being told by their religious leaders that if they suffer physically, emotionally or spiritually they must be sinners and are being punished for their sins, it is a weight lifted from their shoulders to be reassured that such suffering is just part of being human. Jesus is not being technical or complex. He is merely reassuring his listeners that suffering is part of being human.

Many spiritual writers and biblical commentators have interpreted this Beatitude as a blessing on humility, but 'poor in spirit' does not mean 'humble' in the Hebrew Bible. The expression mostly means broken or crushed in spirit. And it is a direct parallel to the first Beatitude in Luke 6. Brokenness is something to endure as part of being human, not something to aspire after. And it's always good to remember that Jesus took his spirituality from the Hebrew Scriptures he cherished and lived by.

We need to make goodness, respect for others, and growing to wholeness our very food and drink.

A number of the other Beatitudes are aspirational, like, 'Blessed are the compassionate.' Jesus is saying it is a wonderful thing to be compassionate towards others. This puts a person in favour with God. Likewise being a peacemaker. We get a glimpse of the high standard Jesus is expecting when he approves as 'blessed, honourable, upright' those who hunger and thirst after what is just and right. He is not saying it's merely a good thing. He is saying we need to be like the elite athlete who hungers and thirsts after success. Living by the standards Jesus has set we need to make goodness, respect for others, and growing to wholeness our very food and drink.

Finally, we are honourable and blessed if we are persecuted for living a life that is good, open-faced and wholesome. Such a life ensures that we are in the reign of God. We may be ridiculed and even vilified for living Christian values, but we have the assurance that we will receive divine favour and blessing as card-carrying members of the kingdom.

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And let us not grow weary of doing good, for in due season we will reap, if we do not give up.

Galatians 6:9

Endurance is one of the most difficult disciplines, but it is to the one who endures that the final victory comes.

Gautama Buddha

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A boxer swiped the air furiously but could not hit his opponent.

'How am I doing?' he asked his trainer at the end of the round.

'Well, if you keep this up,' replied the trainer, 'he might feel the draughts and catch a cold.'

Laurie Woods