

Fourth Sunday in Ordinary Time

January 29th, 2023

Reading 1 – Zephaniah 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.

Zephaniah 2:3, 3:12-13 – Zephaniah is one of the minor prophets in the Old Testament. While we do not know when Zephaniah was born we do know that his prophetic ministry existed during the reign of King Josiah (640-609 BCE). Zephaniah was most likely from the middle class as the genealogy listed at the beginning of the book references authentically Judean names. Besides this little information we don't much else about the person Zephaniah.

Zephaniah is known, like Amos, predominantly as a prophet of judgment. He frequently references "the Day of the Lord," which is interpreted as a day of judgment where God will look at the deeds of the people and punish all those who disobeyed God. This punishment is universal, both Jewish and foreign people are part of God's wrath. This is most likely because during that time period, King Josiah started a reform with the Jewish people to try and remove themselves from the influence of foreign powers. Currently at that time Judah was a vassal state to Assyria. But, the Assyrian dynasty was coming to an end as the Babylonians were rising to power. It is this foreign influence that Zephaniah is probably reacting to as both Jewish and foreign people who are not following the law of God.

It's also important to note that Zephaniah also had prophecies of hope and salvation. Zephaniah pictures a world where God gathers all people into becoming one nation. Part of Zephaniah is actually referenced in the Vatican II document

Nostra Aetate, which is the document of relationships with non-Christian faiths about the universality of salvation.

In our reading today we get short glimpses of the prophecy of Zephaniah and his messages of hope to the people. Prior to the beginning of chapter 2 in verse 18 of chapter 1 God will enact the “Day of the Lord” by consuming the earth with fire and destroy everything that is living on earth. But, then chapter 2 opens with a sign of hope, maybe all is not lost for the nations. If an individual humbles himself before God and follows his ways “perhaps” he will be saved. Our reading continues into the middle of chapter 3 which outlines hope that the people will continue to exist. Their existence though is only followed by the purging of the evil things people have done. It seems by reading through the missing pieces of Zephaniah one gets the idea that even those who have fallen away from God can still be saved. But first they must realize their fault and put their faith completely in God who alone is the one who can save.

Comments/Questions: In studying virtues through the Virtues Project this is a line they give for humility, “Be open to every lesson life brings, trusting that our mistakes are often our best teachers. Be thankful for our gifts instead of boastful.” (<https://www.virtuesproject.com/virtues-definitions-1>) I really like the end of this definition as humility sometimes can be blurred with arrogance. Are there successes in life that you are proud of? How do you share those successes with others without crossing that line into arrogance? In your opinion what keeps you from crossing the line between humility and arrogance? – B.J.

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

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

Reading 2 – 1 Corinthians 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."

1 Corinthians 1:26-31. Corinth was a thriving seaport city, with people of diverse backgrounds who were attracted to the possibility of attaining social status. After a less-than-successful mission in Athens, Paul travelled to Corinth a humbled man. He had tried to dazzle the Athenians with his learning, trying to win them over by demonstrating his knowledge of Greek philosophy, but they were unimpressed and “yawned him out of town.” After this experience, he did some soul searching and determined that he would abandon the intellectual approach and preach from his heart based on his life-altering experience of Jesus as Risen Lord on the road to Damascus. Humbled, he preached “Christ crucified” from his heart.

At Corinth, he met people like Priscilla and Aquila, who became co-missionaries with Paul. It should be noted that there were influential women who contributed to the spread of the gospel. The house churches at Corinth made up the church community (ekklesia) in that region, and their members proved to be conflicted and problematic at times, thus prompting Paul to write 1 and 2 Corinthians (52-53 CE and 55-56 CE). Paul believed that the Holy Spirit had brought believers (Jew and Gentiles) together at baptism, and last week, he passionately pleaded with his “brothers and sisters” to avoid conflict and reminded them to manifest the unity of the Spirit. They are to live out their baptismal call and live the life of communion that is strengthened in the sharing of the Eucharist. (As we know, ironically, the Eucharistic gatherings prompted Paul to admonish this community, because they were not being hospitable and caring toward others—especially those who were of lower status.)

In today’s passage, Paul is reminding his brothers and sisters at Corinth to humbly accept who they are in relationship to God. He states that many were of lowly status in the human community when they were called (klesis)—“nobodies” in the

human community. Nevertheless, God called 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.”

Comments/Questions: Notice how this passage picks up on the tone of the reading from Zephaniah, as well as the gospel where Jesus congratulates those who are humble in today's Gospel. In today's world, as well as in the Church, we have people who are arrogant, condescending, and determined to put their own wills before God's. The world is full of people who dismiss the poor and the marginalized, suggesting “they” should pull themselves up by their own bootstraps. When they are in political positions, they try to tailor policies and programs according to social Darwinism. In the Church, we have people who focus so much on dogma and rules that they all-but-eliminate any empathy for people who struggle, insisting that they aren't “getting with the program” and accepting responsibility for conforming to an overly rigorous emphasis on accepting the teachings of the one true Church. While we may have some who are too lax and living according to their own wills, there are many who struggle to stay afloat when it comes to living a life of faith, those trapped in poverty, who experience serious physical and mental health problems, or those who are the victims of racism. Where do we fit on the spectrum between these two mentalities? What does humility look like in the everyday life of a disciple? – C.H.S.

Gospel- Matthew 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."

Mt 5: 1-12a- As we dive into what is titled in the Paulist Biblical Commentary as "the great Sermon". We encounter a piece of the Gospels that has drawn so many who have read and heard it out loud. It has been so captivating for thousands of years because it draws on some fundamental nuances that many groups (both believers and non-believers) can identify with.

For those seeking out a relationship with God (as this time this is the people of Israel), when this sermon was delivered (and even today), this was the Torah for the renewed people of God. Now this did not mean that the Mosaic Torah was abolished, instead it is the same Torah reinterpreted and "fulfilled" (5:17) by the Son in light of God's will for the kingdom. Jesus, with the unparalleled authority that belongs to him as God's son, imparts a new and definitive interpretation. One that unlike the earlier visions of who God is and what God is all about paints a picture of God who is faithful and supremely caring for creation. A God who is now intervening in the world to save it from destruction. And by knowing God in this way, it also can be seen as an instruction that had much to do with who the disciples are to be and how they are to live in order that they may be of some benefit to the afflicted world.

And for anyone who was curious, maybe seeking to understand a deeper meaning in life or to what Jesus was about (this is depicted by the "crowds" which would have been a conglomeration of groups and not just disciples of Jesus). These words were a continuation of astonishing acts that were precipitated by signs and wonders he had been performing. To those who were listening in, in effect, they are hearing a message and mission. A message in the form of the beatitudes (3-12) that depicts not only the blessedness of those who embrace this way of life (following Jesus), but also a reminder for the disciples (and the people who fit these beatitudes) and those who feel that no one sees them (meek, poor in spirit, merciful, those who mourn, etc.) that God loves and is found in them too, not just the "chosen" people. They also hear a mission in the fact that these statements were not made for this one moment in time and for this region they were being spoken in. Instead, they were meant to have an impact upon the world, a beginning spark in a divine project to humanize/divinize the world that we live in that up until now had been in the grip of alienating/dehumanizing forces (Paulist Biblical Commentary, 2018, pgs. 918-919).

Comments/Questions: When you look through the beatitudes, is there one that stands out the most, and why? When you look at them, is there anyone you know personally that portrays them well? – P.M.