

Fourth Sunday after Epiphany  
Year A - 29/1/2017

Micah 6:1-8  
Psalm 15  
1 Corinthians 1:18-31  
Matthew 5:1-12

**In the name of the Trinity; Creator, Redeemer, and Life-Giver...**

The story is told of a sermon preached once by a priest at the occasion of a monastic Oblate making his profession to the Order. And using the Gospel of the day, the preacher described the journey of the man being received as a monk in terms of the Beatitudes.

Once the man experienced humility through some kind of trauma or setback, discovering his need of God, his journey was set in motion. (Blessed are the pure in heart). Then, because of his own misfortune, the struggles of other people touched him. He found he cared for people and their suffering in the world (Blessed are those that mourn). His arrogance began to slip away (Blessed are the meek), and at the same time he longed for holiness and justice for the oppressed and disenfranchised (Blessed are they that hunger and thirst after righteousness).

He began thinking of others more than himself (Blessed are the merciful) and gave himself to others more freely. As he continued dropping his pretensions, he uncovered his authentic self - layer by layer, even surprising himself (Blessed are the pure in heart). And living into the Christian imperative, he took on activism and peace-making, attracting the inevitable condemnation from the world. (Blessed are the peacemakers. Blessed are those who are persecuted for righteousness' sake). Unconsciously, he embodied the Beatitudes through his conversion and growing in grace through the stages of his adult life.

Now for most of us, we are not called to such a life, and I suspect we struggle with many aspects of the Beatitudes, if we are to think of them as something we somehow need to take on in our lives.

What I offer you this morning takes its inspiration from Richard Rohr, the great Franciscan theologian, when he reminded me of just how radical this teaching of Jesus is.

The vast majority of people throughout history has been poor, disabled, or oppressed in some way (i.e., “on the bottom”). Indeed, you may have seen the somewhat unbelievable statistic just last week which informed us that the world’s 8 richest people (all men) are now as wealthy as the poorest half of the world’s population (some 3.6 billion other people).

So the vast majority of people would have experienced history in terms of a need for change. The people who wrote the books and controlled the social institutions, however, have almost always been the comfortable people on the top. Much of history has been recorded from the side of the winners, except for the unique revelation of the Bible, which is an alternative history from the bottom: from the side of the enslaved, the dominated, the oppressed, and the poor, culminating in the scapegoat figure of Jesus himself.

So it should come as no surprise to us, then, that in the Gospels it’s those on the bottom who tend to follow Jesus: the lame, the poor, the blind, the prostitutes, the drunkards, the tax collectors, the sinners, the outsiders, and the foreigners. It is demonstrably those on the inside and the top who crucify him: elders, chief priests, teachers of the Law, scribes, and Roman occupiers.

My point is that as we read the Beatitudes this morning, we need to really critique our own perspective if we are to see and follow the truth of Scripture all the way through. Because if we simply read these sayings of Jesus in terms of a comfort - a reassurance to those who find themselves in these unenviable situations, then we miss their subversive nature. In these words of Jesus, this is what is known as liberation theology.

But so often we as Western Christians fail to appreciate liberation theology because of seventeen hundred years of interpreting the Scriptures from the perspective of the empowered class, rather than from the perspective of the marginalized, who first received the Gospel message with such excitement. Once Christianity became the established religion of the Roman Empire (after AD 313), we largely stopped reading the Bible from the side of the poor and the oppressed.

For the first 300 years after Jesus' death, Christians were the oppressed minority; we were rebels hiding in catacombs. But by the year 400, Christians had changed places. It is said that Christianity moved from the catacombs to the basilicas. That is the point at which we started reading the Bible not as subversive literature but as establishment literature. Once we were in a position of power and privilege, we couldn't read or understand many Scriptures (for example, the Sermon on the Mount) because we had to maintain our empire, and in this direction the Scriptures give us little support or consolation

But when Scripture is read through the eyes of vulnerability—what we call the “preferential option for the poor” or what Rohr calls “the bias from the bottom” it will always be liberating and transformative. Scripture will not be used to oppress or impress. The question is no longer “How can I maintain the status quo?” (which just happens to benefit me), but “How can we all grow and change together?” Now we have no top to protect, and the so-called “bottom” becomes the place of education, real change, and transformation.

The bottom, or what Jesus calls in his opening address “the poor in Spirit” (Matthew 5:3), is where we have no privilege to prove or protect but much to seek and become. Dorothy Day said, “The only way to live in any true security is to live so close to the bottom that when you fall you do not have far to drop, you do not have much to lose.” [1] From that place, we can be used as instruments of transformation and liberation for the rest of the world.

So, while in understanding the ideals of the beatitudes as being important for the world, and longing for their instigation, it is also important for a similar revolution to take place within our own soul as well. I wonder whether this is why the present Pope, Francis, is such a monumental breakthrough, holding together both prophet and priest, both bottom and top. In so much of what he does he embodies these ideals, and they surely have transformed him and his ministry.

So, perhaps you want to consider how in your own lives, or how in the life of this parish we might together set this revolution in motion? If so, let me offer you just one way. And this way comes directly from another of our readings today - the voice of God through the Prophet Micah.

Do you want to change the world? Then do this:

“do justice, love mercy, walk humbly with your God”

In the name of God. Amen.