



Blessed are the poor in spirit,  
for theirs is the kingdom of  
heaven.” — *Matthew 5:3*

## 4<sup>TH</sup> SUNDAY ORDINARY TIME A (2008)

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FR. JOE SOBIERAJSKI, S.J.

ZEPHANIAH 2:3; 3:12-13 1 CORINTHIANS 1:26-31

MATTHEW 5:1-12A

When one mentions the prophets of the Old Testament the names of Jeremiah, Daniel, Jonah and others come immediately to mind, but the name Zephaniah probably not so much, unless you are someone with a deep interest in the Hebrew Bible. In the course of our three-year Sunday cycle we hear from this minor prophet only twice and perhaps another two in our weekday readings. He is, however, known as the prophet of doom and destruction and his words were the inspiration for the sequence from the old Requiem Mass, *Dies Irae*: “O day of wrath, o day of mourning, earth to ashes now returning.” In other words his mood is dark, and his words almost always threatening. Our reading today is notable for its strong contrast to what is expected of Zephaniah, for here we have quite a wonderful expression of humility and poverty of spirit. He speaks about a “remnant” of the people who, since they sincerely seek God and His will, find the day of wrath turned into a day of joy as they are protected by the Lord in whom they have put their trust. For those who seek God and His justice, His mercy is always available. The “remnant” of whom Zephaniah speaks is also known as the *Anawim*. The *Anawim* are the humble believers who are always ready to do God’s will, and who find their hope only in the Lord.

The *Anawim* of the Old Testament seem to be those who Jesus has in mind today as we listen to Matthew’s Gospel today. The “Kingdom of God” or “the Kingdom of Heaven” in Matthew is the concern and theme of Jesus’ preaching, and the Sermon on the Mount, which takes all of Chapters 5, 6 and 7 in his Gospel, is a kind of outline of the way one who follows Christ is to live his or her life. Matthew of course begins with the Beatitudes, nine in number. To understand these “blesseds” we must first understand that these words are spoken by Jesus who Himself is poor in spirit, meek and afflicted. He is the one who hungers for justice. He is merciful, pure in heart and the ultimate peacemaker. He is persecuted and reviled to the death. But, He is also the One who is now exalted at the Father’s right hand. We should not get the idea as we listen to the Beatitudes that it is necessarily blessed, that is a good thing, to be meek or poor, or suffering, but because those who now undergo those circumstances are so while still maintaining their hope and trust in the Lord, they like He will be rewarded and blessed in the future.

Neither should we understand the nine Beatitudes as being distinct types of blessed. They are, in a sense, one in the same; they overlap, and they form a wholeness of what a Christian should be following the image of Jesus. This becomes clear as we read the rest of Matthew's Gospel. In his Gospel the poor, the meek, the hungry, and so on are those who commit themselves to the Kingdom no matter what the risk. In Matthew, if we follow Jesus then, it is expected that we bear fruit. It is by that fruit, our compassion, our concern, our love—by what we do for others that we are ultimately to be judged.

Here at the very beginning of Christ's public life, and near the beginning of Matthew's Gospel we have a kind of synopsis of the entire work first in the Beatitudes and then in the rest of these three chapters. The first Beatitude speaks of being "poor in spirit" which as a biblical expression means an inner or spiritual poverty in which one relies only on God. It is an inner attitude of humility. Meekness has been defined by some theologians as self-controlled anger which leads one to seek justice. It is not a passive quality of someone who is fearful, but the quality found in someone like Moses, who is described in the Book of Numbers as the meekest man on earth, yet has the courage to do God's will. To hunger and thirst for holiness is to put such a price on goodness as it mirrors the goodness of God, that one is willing to suffer for that goodness. Mercy is not simply sentimental pity, but the ability to identify and to suffer with those who suffer. To possess a clean heart means that one serves God not for any personal gain or reward, but simply because God is God. Peacemakers are those who are able to promote harmony within a community. A peacemaker is a reconciler who by establishing right relationships between individuals makes the community a better place to live.

Christ tells us here at the very beginning of His public life that persecution will be something that He will endure, and therefore will be a part of the lives of those who follow Him. The early church was confronted with such persecution from both Jews and Gentiles. In our own lives, one who lives the values of Christ is constantly being brought into conflict with the values of the world. To stand up for what is right and just and moral today usually wins a different kind of persecution. One stands out and alone, and is seen as being out of step with the times and with the unlimited personal freedom our society demands, no matter who may be harmed. In the Beatitudes those who are blessed are those who choose the good of others over their own personal gain or pleasure.

With the Sermon on the Mount, Jesus takes His place in the prophetic tradition of the Old Testament in which Yahweh is portrayed as the unfailing defender of the poor, the marginalized, and the oppressed, those who without Him would be defenseless. These are again the *Anawim*, those on whom God builds salvation.

In Paul's First Letter to the Corinthians he reminds this community that most of them are not wise as the world considers wisdom, they are not rich in material goods, nor are they men and women of power. Yet, they were chosen by God through the liberating sacrifice of Christ. In Him they become spiritually wise, and rich, and powerful.

The Beatitudes set up a sharp contrast between what it means to be blessed or happy in the Lord, and what it means to be blessed or happy in the eyes of the world. The world demands that we see nothing beyond ourselves, and Christ demands that we see everything beyond self. The way of Christ is fueled by humility; the way of the world by over-weening pride.

The Beatitudes are a mosaic of Christ, and if we look at the nine qualities they present and see them all in ourselves, then we have reached perfection and sanctity. I seriously doubt, however, that any of us really come close to fitting the image. Oh, we may be meek and merciful one day, and the next our vengeful dark self may reveal itself. We may be compassionate one hour and scornful the next. We might at one minute urge reconciliation, and in another be the source of division. If it sounds like I am calling us schizophrenic, perhaps, I am. We are certainly imperfect sinners, and different people, different circumstances seem to bring our different opposing sides of our spiritual personalities. We may have thought about it as kids as the angel on our right shoulder and the devil on our left constantly wrestle for superiority. As adults the reality of the struggle is difficult to ignore. It takes a determination on our part as well as a reliance on God's grace and a trust in His loving support to be a contemporary member of the *Anawim*. Remember, to be a member of the *Anawim* does not mean that we are perfect. It means that we have made the choice, and are continually making the choice to follow Christ who is meek and humble of heart.

I suppose the questions are "*Are we committed enough to struggle in the deepest part of our being to be one with that humble Christ? Is the struggle worth it, or would we rather give into a world that offers us wealth, power, and prestige, but leaves us hollow, empty and soulless?*" Ultimately the *Anawim* are not in a position of weakness, but one of profound strength in gaining what really counts.