

Fourth Sunday of Ordinary Time – Year A [Mt 5:1-12a]

Today we begin the first of several weeks reading from the Sermon on the Mount. The Sermon extends for three chapters and teaches the followers of Christ how we are to act and pray if we are to accept his invitation to the heavenly kingdom. We start with the Beatitudes that serve as an introduction to His message; a call to have Faith in the message of the Kingdom. These pronouncements are central to the teachings of the faith. But before we go too far, we should first answer the question about what “beatitude” even means.

Beatitude derives from the Latin word *beati* meaning blessed or, in perhaps a more concrete way, it means a state of bliss or happiness. So when we speak of the beatitudes, we are talking about those things that lead to a true sense of happiness. As the catechism states, “The Beatitudes depict the countenance of Jesus Christ and portray his charity. ... they shed light on the actions and attitudes characteristic of the Christian life; they are the paradoxical promises that sustain hope ...” (CCC 1717).

So why does Christ start out the message of the Kingdom with these “paradoxical promises”? If they are central to the faith, why are they so often misunderstood?

Each of us have a natural desire for happiness and that desire is written on our hearts by God so that we are drawn to Him; the only one that can truly fulfill that desire. By calling each of us to a pursuit of happiness, Christ is calling us to turn toward God and His Eternal Kingdom. The paradox in each pronouncement is to remind his disciples, both then and now, that happiness is not found in what society defines as success, but rather in following the way of the Lord.

It has become popular in many Christian circles to see the Beatitudes as Christ’s call to a form of radical social justice. I recently read an article that broke the beatitudes down into two parts. The first four statements were described as defining groups of the “oppressed” and how they would be rewarded for their oppression. The author then wrote that the last four statements were about how those with power should respond to the social iniquity of the oppressed. The gist of the article was about how we were to establish the Kingdom on Earth, but is that really the purpose of the Beatitudes? I think when we reread verse 12 it becomes obvious that Christ was speaking not about this world but achieving the reward of Heaven.

So having read some modern interpretations of the Beatitudes, I dug back a bit further in Church history. First, I read through St Thomas Aquinas’s thoughts on the Beatitudes and then went further back to the writings of St Augustine of Hippo. It is St Augustine that I would like to use as a jumping off point for understanding the Beatitudes.

St Augustine layouts the Beatitudes as a way toward Christian perfection. In his various writings he associates the seven Beatitudes with the seven gifts of the Holy Spirit and the seven petitions in the Our Father [*De sermone Domini in monte*].

In the first beatitude, Christ speaks about those who are “poor in spirit”. Note that he doesn’t simply say “the poor”, but rather he qualifies it as the poor “in spirit”. This seems to make it obvious that he doesn’t specifically mean those lacking in earthly wealth.

So what does it mean to be poor in spirit? It means to be humble, to approach God like a child. Augustine associates this state of humility to Fear of the Lord in which we approach God in awe filled supplication. Fear of the Lord is a gift born out of love of God and is a “filial fear” where our fear is not based on the fear of punishment by a stronger force, but rather fear of disappointing God whom we should love above all other things. It is fitting that this is the first beatitude since humility is the foundation of the Christian spiritual life because it places us in right relationship to God. When we pray “Hallowed be thy name” it is not a petition that God’s be made sacred, for He is sacred by his very nature, but it instead is a request that we be given the grace of humility to approach God in awe and wonder knowing everything is from Him.

The second beatitude speaks about the happiness of “those who mourn”. We often think of mourning in the context of those who have lost a loved one, but in this context it is talking about those who grieve for their past sins or the offense others give God through their sin. It is the grief of those who recognize the separation from God. When Christ says they shall be comforted, he is talking about how the Paraclete, the Consoler, will infuse us with peace and joy by letting go of the vices of this world in exchange for the embracing of eternal joy. St Augustine relates this beatitude to the gift of Knowledge which allows us to judge between the temptations towards created things of this world versus the right ordering of our actions towards the will of God. It is the gift that allows us to discern if our actions will lead us to our ultimate end in God. This is what we mean when we pray “Thy will be done on earth as it is in heaven”; we pray for the grace that our actions align with the will of God that we may join him in the Heavenly kingdom.

Next Christ speaks to the blessedness of the “meek”. Here we aren’t talking about the common interpretation of meek meaning someone who is overly submissive or does not stand up for themselves. Meek here means those who do not give into discouragement and irritability when they are treated unjustly. As St Augustine put it: “he who seeks piously ... does not find fault, does not resist; and this is to become meek” The meek don’t fight back out of a sense of wounded pride, but attempt to overcome injustice with acts of charity. He relates meekness with the gift of piety which allows us to love God and worship him because of that love. When we petition God by praying “Thy Kingdom Come” we are asking for the grace to overcome evil in this world through acts of good bourn out of our love of God.

After the meek, Christ speaks about those who “hunger and thirst for righteousness”. In other translations the phrase used is “thirst for justice”. Justice is often one of those words that end up having different meanings for different people. For some, justice is a legalism about punishment and the repercussions of violating the law. For others, justice becomes a somewhat vague feeling about a desire

that no one suffers any hardship. This is the sentiment that underlies statements like “Justice demands that there are no rich and poor” or that “no one should live a life better than another.” In the Bible, justice is concerned with giving God and our neighbors those things owed to them by their nature. We should never confuse justice, especially social justice, with lack of hardship in life. Here we are talking about those who have a deep, aching need to do right by God. Augustine writes “My meat is to do the will of my Father, which is righteousness”. God is owed our reverence, worship, and love even if it is in opposition to what society demands. The gift of fortitude strengthens us to endure hardship in pursuing right action. When we petition God to “give us this day our daily bread” we are asking for the grace to trust in His providence and so receive the bread of life that sustains us for eternal life.

The fifth beatitude speaks of the merciful. When we show mercy and compassion to others, we can expect mercy for our own faults and failings. We might not receive that mercy in this life, but Christ very clearly tells us that we will be treated with compassion if we also treat others the same way. This is related to the gift of counsel where we are given the grace to make prudent choices in how we act. We ask God to “forgive our trespasses as we forgive others” not simply because we want mercy for ourselves, but because we will only truly understand God’s mercy when we have learned to forgive others out of love for them as God’s children.

When we speak of the “pure of heart” in the sixth beatitude, we are not talking about those who never, or rarely, sin, but rather those who seek out God without divided intentions. The “pure of heart” are detached from worldly allurements. Attachment to earthly desires can act like a spiritual cataract that doesn’t allow us to see God clearly. When those attachments are purged from our hearts we can enter into God’s presence without distraction. Indeed, what could distract us once we are face to face with the living God? The gift of understanding grants us the ability to know the mysteries of the faith more clearly and thereby more clearly know God. When we pray “lead us not into temptation” we ask for the strength to reject those things that lead to sin and disordered attachment to the world rather than to God.

In the final beatitude, Christ speaks to “the peace makers” becoming the adopted sons of God. The peacemakers aren’t simply those who avoid war and conflict, but are those who have found peace in Christ by rejecting the worldly passions that lead us to inner turmoil. We all should avoid undue strife in the world, we will always struggle to reduce conflict if our inner most heart is in turmoil. Both internal and external conflict are weapons of Satan to draw our hearts from God toward earthly concern. Wisdom is the gift that allows us to see divine truth and removes the blinders that lead us to conflict. It is for that reason that we pray to be “delivered from evil” so that we may have peace to follow God without anxiety.

The astute might note that I mentioned seven beatitudes but have not mentioned the final statement about those “who are persecuted for righteousness’ sake”. St Augustine relates that this final statement

is a consequence of the first seven; the proof of the perfection of those blessings. In other words when we turn our lives towards Christ then we can expect to be persecuted because this world is still under the sway of the Father of Lies who wants to see us fail in loving God.

When we read and reflect on the beatitudes we should always keep in mind that they are calls to how we should live our lives in Christ. We shouldn't see the beatitudes as a list of groups of people that merit salvation to the exclusion of others. Christ died for all of us and each of us receive the gifts in different measure. What is important is that we understand that the Kingdom of God is not purely a matter of our external circumstances, those things beyond our control, but rather our internal attitude and our willingness to cooperate with the grace of God. We need to always be ready to accept the invitation of Christ to love and follow where God leads us. Even when it's difficult, we have to remember that our ultimate end is eternal life with God.

Selection of works used in preparation

(not all quoted or used directly)

Saint Thomas Aquinas

Of the Beatitudes

Summa Theologica – First Part of the Second Part – Treatise on Habits – Question LXIX

Thomas Aquinas, *Summa Theologica*, trans. Fathers of the English Dominican Province (London: Burns Oates & Washbourne, n.d.).

Of Prayer - Whether the Seven Petitions of the Lord's Prayer Are Fittingly Assigned?

Summa Theologica – Second Part of the Second Part – Treatise on Prudence and Justice – Question LXXXIII – Article 9

ibid

Commentary on Matthew - Chapter 5

Thomas Aquinas, *Commentary on the Gospel of St. Matthew*, trans. Paul M. Kimball (Dolorosa Press, 2012), 139–160.

Catena Aurea: Commentary on the Four Gospels – Matthew Chapter 5

Thomas Aquinas, *Catena Aurea: Commentary on the Four Gospels, Collected out of the Works of the Fathers: St. Matthew*, ed. John Henry Newman, vol. 1 (Oxford: John Henry Parker, 1841), 148–160.

Saint Augustine

Sermons 53 & 53A

Saint Augustine, *Sermons 51–94 on the New Testament*, ed. John E. Rotelle, trans. Edmund Hill, vol. III, *The Works of Saint Augustine: A Translation for the 21st Century* (Hyde Park, NY: New City Press, 2009), 66–84.

Sermon on the Mount [*De sermone Domini in monte*], Book 1, Chapters 1 & 2

Saint Augustine, *New Testament I and II*, ed. Boniface Ramsey, Kim Paffenroth, and Roland Teske, trans. Michael G. Campbell, Kim Paffenroth, and Roland Teske, vol. 15 & 16, *The Works of Saint Augustine: A Translation for the 21st Century* (Hyde Park, NY: New City Press, 2014), 23–26.

Navarre Bible Commentary

Saint Matthew's Gospel, *The Navarre Bible* (Dublin; New York: Four Courts Press; Scepter Publishers, 2005), 48–50.

Catechism on the Seven Petitions of the Lord's Prayer

Articles 2803-2854, 2857-2865