

29 January 2023 – The 4th Sunday after The Epiphany: Matthew 5:1-12

When Jesus saw the crowds, he went up the mountain; and after he sat down, his disciples came to him. Then he began to speak, and taught them, saying... Then follows The Beatitudes, so-called because each begins with the Latin word *Beatus*, blessed. Rather than looking at The Beatitudes, let us focus on the event itself. Unless we understand what Jesus is doing, we will not fully comprehend his teaching.

There is ambiguity as the scene opens. Is Jesus reacting to the anonymous crowds, no doubt containing curiosity seekers, spectacle junkies, and real or potential enemies? Are the Beatitudes meant to discourage the hangers-on so only the serious remain? Is Jesus' teaching only for the disciples or for the crowds, too.

Four things are certain. First, Jesus' 'place' in the scene. He *went up the mountain*. In Greek the definite article 'the' carries more weight than in English; it indicates something definite. We are to immediately make the connection with the giving of the Law on Mount Sinai. As Moses went up the mountain to meet God and receive the Law, the disciples go up to be with Jesus and receive the New Law. In the Bible various mountains, not just Sinai, are meeting places with God.

A second thing is Jesus sat down to teach. This was and is the traditional posture of great teachers. Indeed, in the Church only bishops are to teach when seated, especially in the bishop's chair, or *Cathedra* in Latin, from whence comes the term, Cathedral, the place where the bishop sits and teaches.

The third observation: Jesus' disciples came to him he did not call them. Disciples recognize the authority and truth of Jesus without prompting or inducement, in contrast to the merely curious. Disciples are intent on learning and knowing Christ's will and ways through firsthand, direct experience.

The fourth observation: Matthew wrote, *Then Jesus began to speak, and taught them, saying...* This triple repetition of Jesus' verbal communication indicates Jesus' teaching is his own. Unlike the scribes of the day, whose teaching was filled with references to rabbinic precedents to establish the pedigree of an opinion, and unlike the Prophets who began their prophecies with "Thus says the Lord," Jesus makes no appeal to past wisdom nor presents himself as God's surrogate spokesperson. Jesus speaks, teaching them on his own authority because he and the Father are One (John 10:30). This has immense implications. Jesus communicates God's will and ways without qualification or intermediary. You've likely heard it said: "It's 10 *Commandments*, not 10 suggestions!" Same with the Beatitudes and the whole Sermon on the Mount (Matthew 5:1—7:28). This is the will of God for followers of Jesus.

A last note on how each Beatitude begins: *Blessed are you....* The Greek word is difficult to translate. 'Happy' denotes an emotional state which is clearly not meant. A closer English word is 'fortunate.' If one practices humility, meekness, poverty of spirit, seeks righteousness and peace, are persecuted—count yourself fortunate because to be so is God-like, living God's righteousness. What we cannot adequately fathom is how astonished was this perspective. The Jews had suffered 100 years of foreign occupation. For pagans, only the gods could be truly blessed because they were immortal, living above life's trouble, strife, and death. In Jesus, God became what we are, taking the struggles, pain, and tragedy of mortal life upon himself to show us the way to eternal joy. For us, God is not removed from the human condition but fills humanity with blessing through sacrifice. To be 'in Christ' is to live such a life, with God's help. When we pray, *...thy kingdom come, thy will be done on earth as it is in heaven...* (Matthew 6:10) this is what we mean.

We will always struggle with God's will becoming our will, as it is in heaven. We are only human. Yet the more, God helping us, we sit at the feet of our divine teacher to learn his ways and practice them in our relationships and environments, the more we are blessed, the more fortunate we are.

O God, make speed to save us. O Lord, make haste to help us. Glory to the Father, and to the Son, and to the Holy Spirit; as it was in the beginning, is now, and will be for ever. Amen.