

Fourth Sunday in Ordinary Time

Reading I: Zephaniah 2:3; 3:12-13

Reading II: 1 Corinthians 1:26-31

Gospel: Matthew 5:1-12a

When it's time for a journey far from home, be it to Uncle Joe's house in Toledo or to a business meeting in Pittsburg, being the prudent people we are, we usually do the right thing by planning our trip beginning with the destination in mind.

Knowing our beginning point and using a dependable roadmap (or GPS if you're technically inclined) we can then choose the safest, fastest and most direct route to wherever we are headed.

And once underway, by paying attention to our map in hand and closely following the directions pertinent to our chosen path we can be confident that we'll arrive at our exact destination in a timely manner with a minimum of difficulty.

But when it comes to the ultimate journey – our journey home to our heavenly Father – are we likewise as prudent in our trip planning? While we may know our beginning point – where we are currently in life as persons (for example where we are in our relationships with God, ourselves and with others) – do we have a clear, unshakeable idea of where our eternal destination actually lies? Or do we plan to merely wander through life with hopes that someday we'll stumble upon where it is we need to be? And even if we do have a sense of our destination in mind, do we have in hand a dependable roadmap that will serve to guide us where God wants us – deep into the bosom of his eternal love?

In today's Gospel, Jesus challenges us to reflect on these critical matters. He asks that we clearly bring into focus our life's true destination. And along with helping us pinpoint our journey's end, Jesus – being the great loving shepherd that he is – provides us with a clear, simple to understand, eight-point road map to his kingdom of happiness. His map? The Beatitudes.

At the heart of Jesus' teaching on the way to life, is the Sermon on the Mount. This sermon begins with the Beatitudes, which we heard proclaimed in today's Gospel. The Beatitudes are

the beginning, the summary and the foundation of Jesus' teaching on his one, true, holy way to the state of exalted bliss and happiness – to life changing peace and serenity.

Jesus, who is the Truth, tells us very specifically that the poor in spirit, those who mourn, the meek, the merciful, the clean of heart, peacemakers, those who hunger and thirst for righteousness, those who are persecuted because of him are “blessed” are “happy.” How exciting it is that those who follow this blessed new kind of life found on the trail blazed by Christ are joyful members of the Kingdom – right now – today!

Let's take a moment or two and reflect on this wisdom that radiates from the heart of God:

- Blessed are the poor in spirit...
 - Poverty of spirit leads us to recognize our neediness as creatures and, with that, come to understand that the greatest good available to us is to lead a life rooted in God. This is the virtue that orients our desires to the bliss of eternal life and leads us away from the allure of the world.
- Blessed are they who mourn...
 - A spirit of mourning helps to reorder and reorient our lives according to what is most essential and lasting. This spirit of mourning opens us to the discovery of how God accompanies us in *all* the circumstances of life.
- Blessed are the meek...
 - The meek are *not* those who lie down under a beating, becoming some kind of Christian doormat. Rather the meek are the ones who are humbly docile to Christ receiving from him the gentle courage, the kind willingness and the divine power to transform the world.
- Blessed are they who hunger and thirst for righteousness...
 - To thirst for righteousness orients us to a love of authentic justice, the first principle of which is to give to God the love and honor due to him. This beatitude also serves to expand our interior vision, making it

more sensitive to the uprightness and morality that was foundational to Christ's earthly life.

- Blessed are the merciful...
 - To be merciful is to live with a forgiving heart, even when ours has been deeply wounded by others. Our mercy-filled heart then becomes the foundation for receiving the pardon for our wrongdoings which God so desires to give us.
- Blessed are the clean of heart...
 - Having a clean heart simplifies and un-complicates our lives. By removing the filth and messiness of impurity, it becomes possible for us to grasp the pure interior freedom which leads to a joyful embrace of God's will.
- Blessed are the peacemakers...
 - Jesus is called the Prince of Peace because he made peace between God and us through the sacrificial shedding of his blood. The blessing of being peacemakers orders our lives according to the sacrifice of the Cross where we, led by Christ, are able to reconcile others who disagree, quarrel or fight.
- Blessed are they who are insulted, reviled and persecuted because of Christ...
 - The way Jesus lived his life certainly ran countercultural. And when we live compassionately when others are callous of heart, or when we are humble and expose pride, or when we are spiritually minded shedding light on a worldly-minded crowd we likewise run countercultural – like Jesus did and that's good.

How, then, can we be confident that a series of a hundred and thirty-two words spoken two thousand years ago is the true roadmap to life for us? To answer this question let's first look at who it is who is doing the speaking and the manner in which the words were conveyed:

- Jesus, the son of the Father, of course is the one who speaks. And it's critical that we remember that we've been *commanded* by our Father God at the Transfiguration to "listen to" his son.
- On the day on the mountain when Jesus spoke to his disciples about the way of life, he *sat down* to teach them. When our Lord teaches, he takes an authoritative posture; he's not simply giving advice, he's unveiling the way and the truth.
- Our confidence in the authenticity of the road map of the beatitudes is also boosted when we hear in the Gospel that Jesus *began to teach* his followers. A literal translation of the Greek for the phrase "he began to teach..." would read "he opened his mouth." In the ancient world, this phrase indicated an official declaration or a setting forth of the speaker's most deeply held convictions.
- Thus, when St. Matthew depicts Jesus as sitting down and opening his mouth, it's as if he were saying "What follows is the soul of Christ's doctrine, his very heart expressed in the most important words spoken by the Word of God."

And these words, spoken by God, laid out as a path to our eternal home, are not just profound verbal statements but live as an intimate reflection or image of the soul of God himself.

Scripture makes it clear that, to be a disciple, a person must intimately link the teaching of Christ, especially in his beatitudes, with our Lord himself. Jesus is not merely saying "Look at this teaching." Rather he cries out "Look at *me*, follow *me*." "*I am* the way, the truth and the life."

When Christ teaches, he claims authority; we can either accept his teaching or reject it, but we can't merely ignore it, nor can we treat it like one opinion among many. In our relationship with Jesus Christ, it's all or nothing. Our attitude towards Jesus' teaching is our attitude toward the Lord himself.

Lord, we know that you want our happiness. This is why you created us, why you redeemed us. Lord, we have moments of happiness, but you want us to have something more – a life

completely fulfilled, truly and eternally fruitful. You look at us and see your dream for our lives. In our minds, hearts and souls bring that dream into focus this day. And as we surrender ourselves to your gentle wisdom, lead us to the happiness of the Father.