

FOURTH SUNDAY IN ORDINARY TIME: JANUARY 29, 2023

This past week I had to go into Boston twice. As usual I took the train. Along the way, going through Dorchester I gazed on the large Gas Tank with the art of Sister Corita Kent that goes back to the bicentennial of 1976. The tank and art really stand out and I have seen it from the air as my plane approached Logan Airport. This week it reminded me of the Vatican Pavilion at the New York World's Fair in 1964. The halls of the entrance into the pavilion were painted with the bright colors of Corita portraying the Beatitudes from today's gospel.

A little reflection in preparing for this Mass made me think that art and color really help me get to get the feel of the Beatitudes. Music also helps. The Beatitudes are like a musical motif that runs through and keeps arising in the midst of the entire Sermon on the Mount, as well as through the parables and teachings of Jesus. The Sermon on the Mount is a compilation of Jesus' teachings on how humans are to live. Today we begin a four week reading of this Sermon.

The moral teaching that most of us have is based on the Ten Commandments. Indeed, these are the base of how people should live together in families, in society. All ten commandments, with the exception of the one to Honor father and mother, tell us what not to do. Jesus said he did not come to abolish the teachings of the Torah but to bring them to fulfillment. The Beatitudes are not rules to follow, no less things not to do, but how to think and behave. They are attitudes in life, be-attitudes.

The Sermon on the Mount is Jesus directing us to raise our consciousness and deepen our understanding of what it means to be human. The Beatitudes provide the motif in this new awareness and stir our minds, heart and imagination to aim for a fuller humanity. Our human history and current western culture point to power, possessions and prestige to prove we are good humans. Jesus raises our expectations, upends our usual way of seeing things. To be human is not just to be nice; not just to be a good person. We have been made in the image and likeness of God. Jesus is telling us what this means.

"Blessed are the poor in spirit, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven." This is not a promise of reward in the next life. It is a call to recognize what human life as being humble and lowly means here and now. The poor in spirit may be literally poor but poor in spirit means more. It describes a person who has integrity,

honesty, knows human relationships with God, neighbor, creation and self are more important than things. It means we aim at love, forgiveness, reconciliation, compassion. It means living dependent on God and not on our own self. It means we need to be attentive to the poor, the marginalized, the people on the peripheries of society and the world. They teach us what human life is about. Our selfishness has meant our adulation of riches and we have allowed the rich to get richer and the poor poorer. We have been haughty in our abuse of God's creation, of animals, the earth, and the materials of the universe, and now we are suffering from our abuse.

The Beatitudes spell out the attitudes that liberate us from our ego-centered lives. Blessed are those who mourn, those who are meek, those who hunger and thirst for righteousness, those who are merciful, those who are pure of heart, those who are peacemakers, those who are persecuted for the sake of justice, those who are persecuted, insulted and have evil spoken against them falsely because of Jesus. Yes, these attitudes upend our usual expectations. We are still evolving in our humanity to see them clearly. Jesus points us to a better way.

Jesus was true to his tradition. In our first reading the prophet Zephaniah describes the years before the fall of Jerusalem and the Babylonian exile in 587b.c. Rulers, prophets and religious professionals had failed the people. In response, Zephaniah proclaims the less notable as honored in God's eyes. It is the humble and lowly who will inherit the land. The Lord always esteems the lowly who the world forgets.

The entire Sermon on the Mount, and especially the Beatitudes, functions as a polemic against the ways and attitudes of the Roman Empire. As such, the Gospel is also an invitation to personal and communal transformation for all, where differences are honored and the true exercise of power leads not to conflict but to unity and peace.

Yes, to achieve this vision may take our entire lives and even beyond. But we are given a path of humility, a blueprint in the Beatitudes. Most of all, this vision provides hope for we are on the way to fulfilling God's plan for us to become happier, holier human beings.

Timothy J. Joyce, S.T.L., O.S.B.