

## REFLECTIONS FOR THE FOURTH SUNDAY IN ORDINARY TIME ~ 29 January 2023

### The Mount ~ The Residence at Littledale

Our God is a shocking God. Jesus is a shocking Son of God. We as Christians are called to be shocking disciples of our God. Today's readings for the fourth Sunday in Ordinary Time starkly remind us of these truths.



In the first reading from the prophet Zephaniah, we are introduced to the phrase “a people humble and lowly” (Zeph 3:12), the *anawim* (*anawah* is the Hebrew word for “humble”). They are the remnant who will survive, the ones who will seek righteousness and humility, who will utter no lies or do no wrong. They are not the rich and powerful and mighty, the ones whom society deems to be successful, the ones who are held up as examples to follow. This is what is shocking about our God – that the humble and lowly ones, the *anawim*, are the examples for all of us to follow. In the verses of Zephaniah following

those in today's reading, we learn that God not only chooses and protects the humble and the weak, but God delights in the *anawim*, “God will rejoice over you with gladness, will renew you in love; will exult over you with loud singing as on a day of festival” (Zeph 3:16-18).

Psalms 146, the first of the set of five psalms which concludes the book of Psalms, deepens this shocking behaviour of our God. Note how each verse begins with “The Lord.” It is as if the psalmist cannot believe that this is happening – “**the Lord** executes justice for the oppressed, **the Lord** sets prisoners free, **the Lord** opens the eyes of the blind. . .” Can you even imagine – the Lord favours the ones who are humble and lowly, the ones who are poor, the ones who are suffering or strangers! They are the ones whom God chooses to protect and uphold, the ones whom God chooses to love.

Paul, in his first letter to the Corinthians, is also startled by God's behaviour. He says, almost in disbelief, that God calls people who were not wise, not powerful, not of noble birth, but weak, low, despised. In doing so, Paul says that “we do not boast in the presence of God, but we boast in the Lord” (1 Cor 1:28, 31). Imagine being able to delight in knowing that it is in our brokenness and vulnerability, in our lowliness and weakness, God is present to us, God chooses us, God delights in us. We are reminded of the words from the song *Anthem* by Leonard Cohen:

Ring the bells that still can ring  
Forget your perfect offering  
There is a crack, a crack in everything  
That's how the light gets in

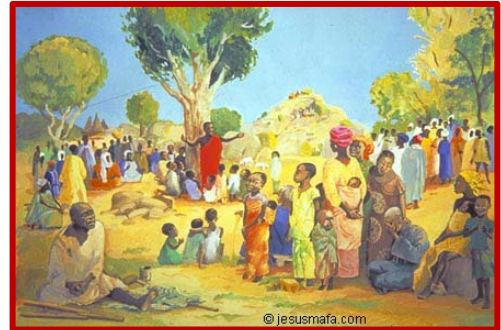


Paul is clear in his words to us that we are not passive recipients in our humility and weakness. Rather our mission in our vulnerability is to re-shape our world to become a world of peace and justice, in which all are included, valued and respected – in his words, “shaming the wise, the weak, the lowly and despised” (1 Cor 1:27-28). The American minister, Terry Hershey, says, “The ordinary moments of every day (even those that confuse us, unnerve us, or break our hearts) are hiding places of the holy. Where the sacred is alive and well. Where hope grows. Anxiety and

vulnerability are real, yes. But the answer is not to chase vulnerability away. It's the opposite. My vulnerability is the signal that I am human, with the capacity to be stretched, to give my heart, to be broken, to cry with those who break, to spill good."

### **Sermon on the Mount, Jesus MAFA**

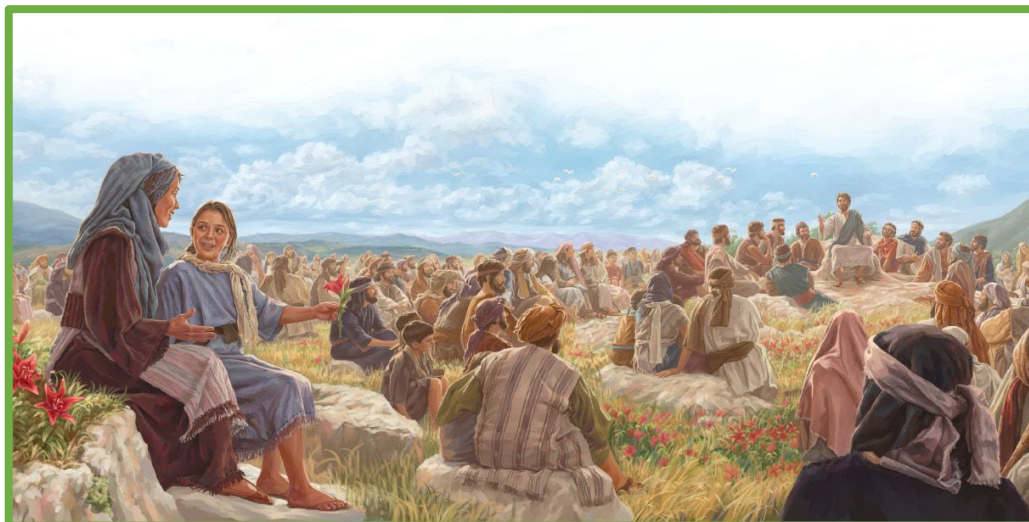
In the reading from Matthew's Gospel, Jesus brings all of these teachings together in his "Sermon on the Mount" in a reflection which we name the beatitudes. He begins with the echo of the *anawim*, "the poor in spirit. . . those who mourn. . . the meek" (Matt 5:2). He goes on to echo the ones on mission to re-shape our world, "those who hunger and thirst for righteousness. . . the merciful. . . the pure in heart. . ." (Matt 5:6). He concludes by naming the cost of daring to be humble, gentle, meek in a world dominated by power and privilege "you are persecuted. . . reviled. . . have all kinds of evil uttered against you" (Matt 5:10). Echoing the passage from Zephaniah, Jesus' words end with "Rejoice and be glad" (Matt 5:31).



Elaine Wainwright rsm helps us read the beatitudes through an ecological lens:

Jesus sees the crowd, a simple statement that links him to the human community, and he goes up the mountain, reminding readers that all that is human takes place in a context, a material context. This context in particular is rich in symbolism. Within Israel's religious tradition, mountains are places of encounter with the divine, for Abraham (Gen 22:2-19), Moses (Ex 19:1-6) and many others. The text states explicitly that Jesus sits down on the mountain – on the earth itself, which acts as an authorising agent for what takes place there. . . The righteousness or right ordering [present in the blessings] is to characterise Divine, human and other-than-human interrelationships. Within them, ecological and social justice meet and embrace. However, right ordering needs to be worked out in each unique location and community, each habitat and ecosystem. In so doing, those hungering and thirsting for right relationships will be satisfied.

The repetition of the Greek word *makarioi* (translated "blessed are") reminds us of the Psalms which are marked by repetition and which overflow with God's blessings. Veronia Lawson rsm reminds us, "For Israel's lyricists, God's favour or blessing is on those whose hope is in God, on those whose delight is in God's way, on those who take refuge in God, on the guileless in spirit, and on those whom God forgives."



The spiritual writer, Jan Richardson, continues the theme found in Paul's letter and in Jesus' words that we are not passive in our humility and gentleness, "To be blessed is not a static state. There is a dynamism within the word *blessed*: it implies an ability to be in the ongoing process of recognizing, receiving, and responding. To be blessed is to enter a kind of pregnancy: to take Christ in, to let him grow in us, to bear him forth, then to receive him and bear him yet again in our acts of mercy, of compassion, of solidarity, of love."

Lest we begin to take the beatitudes for granted because they are so familiar to us, Pope Francis challenges us to find new ways to live them (and the teachings in our other three readings today). In a homily given in 2016 in Switzerland, he added these for our reflection in the midst of the realities our own time:

- ❖ Blessed are those who remain faithful while enduring evils inflicted on them by others, and forgive them from their heart.
- ❖ Blessed are those who look into the eyes of the abandoned and marginalized, and show them their closeness.
- ❖ Blessed are those who see God in every person, and strive to make others also discover God.
- ❖ Blessed are those who protect and care for our common home.
- ❖ Blessed are those who renounce their own comfort in order to help others.
- ❖ Blessed are those who pray and work for full communion between Christians.

All these are messengers of God's mercy and tenderness, and surely they will receive from God their merited reward.

The Presbyterian minister, Thom Shuman, helps us reflect on the "foolishness" and the joy of today's readings:

In the intricacies of a spider's web, an OS designer is put to shame.  
In the songs of a meadowlark, talk show hosts are stunned to silence.  
In the practical joke played on Easter, death is knocked off its lofty perch.

In the foolishness of your salvation, God of tenderness,  
you bring us new life.

In your execution as a common criminal, rather than dying as a hero;  
in sticking your foot out to trip the wise, so the unaware can go to the front of the line;

in sharing your kingdom with the outsiders, while the boasters fall strangely silent,  
your foolishness in becoming human, Servant of the Blesseds, transforms our lives.

In those words which offer hope to the despairing,  
in the quiet whispers which fill the emptiness of all who yearn for righteousness,  
in the gentle songs which can comfort those whose hearts overflow with grief,  
you are foolish enough to teach us to speak, Wisdom of God's Heart,  
not with sophisticated logic, but the simple language of grace.

Continue to call us to foolishness, God in Community, Holy in One.



How do you see blessing in your own life and in the lives of your community and the Earth beings around you? How do you see you, in your brokenness and gentleness and humility, as blessing for all who share your life journey – human and other-than-human? Blessed are the poor in spirit, the kin-dom of heaven is theirs!