

5 Epiphany, Yr. A  
February 5, 2017  
Isaiah 58:1-9a; Matthew 5:13-20

I know that I said we'd talk a bit about the Beatitudes this week, but before we do that, I'd like to point out that both the Isaiah reading this morning and the Matthew reading are continuations of what we heard last week. You'll remember that the OT reading last week was from Micah and that the Israelites were rather frantically trying to get God's attention with every increasing sacrifices and then God, through Micah, saying, "You know what the Lord wants – not sacrifices, but lives in which you do justice, love kindness and walk humbly with God. There's the same idea in this Isaiah reading, which opposes not worship, but false and empty worship. "Go tell them," God says to Isaiah, "you say you're fasting and humbling yourselves, but all you're really doing is going through the motions. If you were REALLY worshipping me, your lives would be transformed, you'd be living differently; you wouldn't be oppressing others or quarreling and fighting. If you were REALLY worshipping me, you'd be correcting injustice and feeding the hungry. And if you would do that, then when you would call for help, I'd say HERE I AM.

I was in Rhinelander yesterday for the Celebration of a New Ministry for their new rector. In his sermon, the bishop quoted from Dante's *Purgatorio*. Purgatory was that place where people who weren't quite ready to see God face to face had a chance to work through whatever they needed to complete. There are seven circles in purgatory, just like in the Inferno, with different sinners at each level. At the level of sloth, the sinners heading for redemption are saying something like Haste, haste, there's no time to waste, for time is (and here he paused so that we could all fill in our culture's line, "that time is MONEY." Instead, what Dante wrote is that TIME IS LOVE. That love is what we're here to learn, that learning to love – beyond selfishness, beyond difference, beyond fear – is what our lives are all about. That's what Isaiah is talking about, too. It wasn't that people weren't showing up for worship. His point was that just showing up and going through the motions isn't enough to restore those right relationships of love with God and with our brothers and sisters that are needed to build the world God wants. True worship allows us to understand God's vision and helps us to conform ourselves to Christ.

This reading from Matthew comes right after the Beatitudes and are still part of the Sermon on the Mount. And all of that follows right after those first disciples were called. So, Jesus is telling them, beginning with the Beatitudes, what kind of life will be expected of them as his disciples. It's said that, along with the Golden Rule and the Ten Commandments, the Beatitudes are the most recognized ethical statements in the world. But it's also said that they're honored more in the breach than in the observance because they seem like statements of impossible ideals – nice, but...well, you know... quite beyond us ordinary humans.

But what if they aren't meant to be impossible ideals, but rather descriptions – descriptions of what the Kingdom is like, right now, and what we who are called to discipleship are to be living and where we are already blessed. You are blessed when you're poor in spirit, you are blessed when you hunger and thirst for righteousness; you are blessed when you are merciful and when you're a peacemaker. That's a valid interpretation because, hard on the heels of these

beatitudes, Jesus tells his follows what we just heard that they ARE the salt of the earth and the light of the world. Present tense, not future. Look at the phrase “salt of the earth.” We still use that phrase – we still say about someone – that “he or she is the salt of the earth.” What do we mean when we say that? Usually that they are trustworthy, solid, useful, they’ve “got it together.” They know what matters and live their lives that way. And how about “the light of the world.” There’s the epiphany theme of light again. Light allows things to be seen correctly, it allows us to understand, it helps us to see where we’re going. The very first words God speaks in the Bible are, LET THERE BE LIGHT. And when John is telling who Jesus is, he says that he was the light that had come into the world, a light shining in the darkness that would not be overcome. So, if Christ was the light of the world, what did he reveal to us by that light? What does he show us that we couldn’t see before? Nothing less than the true nature of God

- That God is love and loves us, each of us, all of us
- That he wills only good for us
- That he wants us to live in the only way that will make us truly happy, blessed, the way that’s outlined in the Beatitudes.

What we see then, allows us to live lives of serenity and confidence even when we’re right in the middle of our troubled, messy and suffering world. It allows us to know that peace that passes all understanding. True worship brings us into the presence of God. The Eucharist is a center part of worship for Episcopalians, in which we can participate in God’s own life. I think I’ve told the story before about the Christian trying to explain the Eucharist to a Buddhist and he said, “Well, people come forward and put out their hands and receive the body and blood of Christ.” “And then what?” the Buddhist asked.” “Well, we just go and sit down,” was the answer. “WHAT?” said the amazed Buddhist. “You receive your God? And then you just go and sit down?” Just like those Israelites who were listening to Isaiah, we need to remember what we’re about in worship, trying to avoid falling into complacency and forgetting the incredible gift we’re given over and over again – given so that the life we take into ourselves will become the very life we live.

And, of course, how we live exhibits our beliefs to the rest of the world. Every time I’m driving and I see someone who has a fish on the back bumper of their car, I’m reminded of the story of the woman who was racing down a city street, going through yellow lights, tailgating the guy in front of her, blowing her horn and giving that unmistakable hand signal. A cop pulled her over. She complained that she hadn’t broken any traffic laws and he replied, “That’s true, but when I saw how you were behaving and then saw the Jesus symbol on the back of your car, I thought, ‘Gosh, that car must be stolen!’” We proclaim that we’re Christians and how we live should be an illustration of the message of Christ.

Before we leave our consideration of the Beatitudes, though, I’d like to look a little more closely at several of them. So, you’re blessed, or happy, or in some translations, honored, says Jesus, if you are poor in spirit, if you are meek, if you mourn, if you hunger for righteousness, if you’re merciful, if you’re a peacemaker, if you’re pure of heart. Some of those are obvious, but I’d like to look a bit deeper at three of them.

The first is blessed are the poor in spirit. Matthew, unlike Luke, adds “in spirit” rather than just saying blessed are the poor. For clearly there is no question of blessedness in poverty – clearly we each need enough to be free of preoccupation with material wants. No one would suggest that hungry children, or the lack of health care, or poor education are blessings. Poverty of spirit is an attitude – an attitude that realizes that we’re NOT self-sufficient, that we have to trust in God – it’s an attitude that requires that we move ourselves out of the center of the universe and make room for God and other people. It’s an attitude that requires that my WANTS aren’t mistakenly understood as my NEEDS and that I’m responsible for the way I handle the gifts, economic and otherwise, that God has given me.

The second I’d like to mention is blessed are those who mourn. Taken in the context of Jesus’ message about the Kingdom of God, we’re to hear that as a call to grieve over our suffering and sinning world – which keys into that other beatitude that says we’re blessed when we hunger and thirst for righteousness – when we long for the kind of living in which all are in right relationship with God and with one another. And let’s think for a minute about the one that says we’re blessed when we’re meek – for us that has a connotation of weakness. And I think that a better word here would be humble, not in the sense of breast-beating and self-deprecation, but in the sense, as we discussed last week, of knowing who we are, both our gifts and our weaknesses and knowing where we are in relation to God, remembering that God’s the creator and we’re the creatures.

And finally, we need to hear Paul’s words, when he says that all of this is folly to the world. It’s been said that each culture has a central project: ancient Sparta, for instance, made war its central project, some medieval societies made arts and learning central, that in the golden age of Greece, politics was central. What about us? Here’s a quote by someone in the Wall Street Journal:

“And what is (our) central project? Well, if a lunar tribe sent a spaceship down to the earth to find out what those American are up to...the moonmen would return home to report that the central project of the US society seems to be the production of resources during working hours and the consumption and destruction of them in leisure time. In other words, we Americans work hard so that we can play hard – earning more to spend more, driving ourselves so we can drive our cars, producing and consuming in an ever-intensifying cycles that keeps gobbling up a growing portion of the earth’s limited resources. “

It’s a vision of individualism, consumerism, and competition in direct contrast with the vision set out by Christ in the Beatitudes. Like those first disciples, he sets out his vision in contrast to the vision of the world. And then we’re asked to choose. Amen.