

THE EMMAUS SERIES

FOURTH SUNDAY YEAR A

Zephaniah: 2:3; 3:12-13

1 Corinthians: 1:26-31

Matthew: 5:1-12

Happy are the poor in spirit; theirs is the kingdom of heaven

Today we begin reading from 'The Sermon on the Mount' - Matthew's masterpiece, gathering together central teachings of Jesus. Singled out in our Christian tradition with this special name, this sequence of Matthew's gospel is the most famous passage in all Christian literature. In today's reading, Jesus instructs us on the nature of true happiness – what the ever-restless human heart is seeking: something beyond life's passing joys and satisfactions, something that we know we are made for, in the depths of our being.

Matthew's all-to-familiar presentation of the 'Beatitudes' has lessons concerning the nature of true happiness that may surprise us - lessons that are as meaningful today as when they were first given. Matthew's gospel, as we have seen, is written for a Christian community made up of Jewish converts; it aims to help them appreciate how Jesus is the fulfilment of all that is dear to them in 'the law and the prophets' (Mt 5:17). As he relates the teaching of Jesus to the biblical tradition, Matthew helps us to appreciate the profound continuity that exists between the two Testaments.

'Blessed (happy) are you'. These words of joyful congratulation, addressed to those to who have known the joy brought by God's blessings, echo down the ages in the story of the scriptures. 'All generations will call me blessed', Mary declares. The Beatitudes have a common pattern: relating the attitudes of those who have taken to heart the Good News of the Kingdom to the corresponding blessings that will be theirs, as God's gift. These blessings are shown by Matthew's presentation to be a magnificent fulfilment of the ideals of old Israel. True disciples of Jesus are 'poor in spirit' - they know that the God of Israel's faith is the champion of the powerless, who will certainly 'hear their cry'. It was in this spirit that the authentic faith of Israel's covenant lived on; and it was in this spirit that Jesus lived out his mission. The 'meek' are those who resist the temptation to rely upon human self-sufficiency and arrogance, finding their security in the Lord. For those who first heard Matthew's gospel, the attitudes of the true believer were summed up in the 'justice' that was the faithful Israelite's right relationship with their God. For this community, therefore, those who 'hunger for justice' do more than take up the cause of the oppressed; they seek the fullness of 'justice', by living according to Christ's new Law of Love. The 'merciful' are those who, faithful to their covenant relationship, have learned from the Saviour how to identify with the generous ways of God. 'Pure in heart' has a far broader meaning than we may tend to assume – the 'heart', so often spoken of in the psalms, is the person's innermost self; and this Beatitude speaks of nothing less than an undivided and generous commitment to the Gospel. 'Peacemakers' are those who identify with the hope at the heart of the biblical tradition – 'peace' (shalom), human wellbeing at every level, God's own gift.

The happiness proclaimed in the Beatitudes is not our achievement, but God's gift: 'Fear not, little flock, for it has pleased the Father to give you the kingdom' (Lk 12:32); 'A peace which the world can not give is my gift to you' (Jn 14:27).

The other readings of our liturgy confirm the central place of the spirit of the Beatitudes in the ongoing story of God's people.

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