

4th Sunday in Ordinary Time (A) '08 -Homily by Fr. Peter Clark

Today we hear the Beatitudes, the opening lines of Jesus' Sermon on the Mount. This speech by the Lord is situated by Matthew after a number of important events. First we hear an account of Jesus' baptism by John, then Jesus' temptation in the wilderness, followed by his first proclamation, "***Repent, for the kingdom of heaven is at hand!***" and then, the calling of his disciples.

What's going on here? A new divine order is being introduced unlike any tribe, nation or empire that has ever existed in the world. The kingdom of heaven is in our midst.

God prepares humanity for their special call into His kingdom by sending John the Baptist to bring people to repentance. "Prepare yourself; avoid the coming judgment, don't miss the one coming who will baptize with fire."

Next, we hear of Jesus himself submitting to this baptism; and after being lifted out of the water, the Holy Spirit descends upon him like a dove. Then, from the clouds we hear a voice, "***This is my beloved Son in whom I am well pleased.***"

This event is Jesus' inauguration by God the Father in the power of the Holy Spirit, as the Messiah, the Son of God. He is on a saving mission. "***Behold, the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world.***" Jesus becomes the source of the renewing Holy Spirit for all humankind.

Jesus calls us to repentance, and announces that the kingdom of heaven is at hand. He then chooses those who will assist him in bringing about God's rule on earth. It's heavy on fishermen. Finally, Jesus goes up to a mountainside to give his inaugural address, the Sermon on the Mount.

In this speech He explains the principles of the new kingdom that is being brought into our midst by his powerful, yet merciful ministry. Chapters 5-7 of Matthew:

Let us examine these first lines, the beatitudes, which are the stepping stones, the path for us into this kingdom of mercy.

Blessed are the poor in spirit for theirs is the Kingdom of heaven.

That's strange. Rather than looking for well established religious people, Jesus considers the best candidates for his movement as those who know their sin, their emptiness, their spiritual poverty.

Blessed are they who mourn for they will be comforted. After realizing our lack of anything Godly in our lives, the next step is a grieving, a deep concern that something has to happen. "I really want to get out of this pit of nothingness, of meaninglessness."

Blessed are the meek for they shall inherit the earth. Meekness here doesn't mean being spineless or easily imposed upon. The meekness in this step is rather a patient compliance, a strong submissiveness to direction. A powerful, wild horse, which is eventually broken and directed by a rider with a bridle, would characterize such meekness.

In the Bible, Moses after he is humbled, tested in the desert, and formed by God, is described as being "the meekest man on earth." Was Moses a weakling? Easily pushed around? No! This meek Moses, when directed By God, walked up to mighty the King of Egypt, "Pharaoh, let my people go!"

So this third step means taking our concern for our spiritual emptiness, and submitting to the Lord's instruction, His plan for us in this new kingdom of heaven. This move implies humbling ourselves and trusting in the formation and direction of the master.

[Many of you will recognize these first three spiritual steps into the kingdom as applicable in other areas. In Education for example:

- 1) Blessed are the ignorant, for theirs is the world of knowledge.
- 2) Blessed are they who lament and grieve their backwardness, for they will be satisfied with understanding.
- 3) Blessed are they who submit to a teacher for they will rewarded with wisdom and insight.]

Isn't it fascinating that Jesus is not looking for kingdom members who already have their lives together? Normally, one seeks out the trained and the competent for their movement. Jesus starts with the poor in spirit.

Just consider who Jesus called for his disciples? ***“I come not to call the self-righteous, but sinners.” “Those who are first will be last, and those who are last will be first.”***

And what kind of person ended up in the early Church? St. Paul tells us today in the second reading.

Consider your own calling, brothers and sisters.

Not many of you were wise by human standards, not many powerful.

Not many of noble birth.

Rather, God chose the foolish of the world to shame the wise,

and God chose the weak to shame the strong,

and God chose the lowly and despised of the world,

those counting for nothing,

to reduce to nothing those who are something,

so that no human being might boast before God.

This is good news for us brothers and sisters. We don't have to have a fine pedigree, or come from a functional family, or have a solid religious education to come into the kingdom. We just need to start where we are, in our weakness, neediness and confusion. We trust in God's mercy for us in Christ. In faith we gently and quietly take the steps in the Beatitudes, and submit to the Lord's plan for our healing and transformation in his Church. We pray each day, come to Mass, tithe to the church, serve our families and do works of mercy.

St. Paul continues, ***He is the source of your life in Christ Jesus, who God made our wisdom, our righteousness and sanctification and redemption.***

Take the steps you “poor in spirit;” follow through on your call from God. Then we will hear the good new of the last beatitude:

Rejoice and be glad, for your reward will be great in heaven.