

Commentary to the 4th Sunday in Ordinary Time (A)

Introduction



Do you want to be happy for a few hours? Get drunk. Do you want to be happy for some years? Grab the pleasures that life gives you. Qohelet himself suggests: “Go, eat your bread with joy and drink your wine with a merry heart ... and spare not the perfume for your head. Enjoy life with the wife you love, all the days of the vain life granted you under the sun” (Ecl 9:7-9).

But how to be happy always?

Joy is not identified with the pleasure that, although loved and blessed by God, is ephemeral, obsolete and so often leads to sadness and disappointment. “Even in laughter the heart may be sad, and the end of joy may be sorrow” (Prov 14:13).

The Bible guarantees a paradox: true and lasting joy is born of commitment, renunciation, self-denial, sacrifice and accompanied by pain. “Now I am glad to suffer for you,” says Paul to the Colossians (Col 1:24). To persecuted Christians, James recommends: “My brethren, consider it as the greatest happiness to have to endure various trials” (Jas 1:2). And Peter recognizes: “You ... rejoice with an indescribable and glorious joy” (1 Pet 1:8).

What is the secret of this joy? Jesus reveals it: “It is better to give than to receive” (Acts 20:35). It is not blessed who accumulates and retains selfishly the goods for himself, but who, distributing, becomes poor to help the needy.

A bewildering proposition. Accepting it is risky, but He is the guarantor.

To internalize the message, we repeat:

“Blessed is he who retains nothing for himself and becomes poor for love.”

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First Reading: Zephaniah 2:3; 3:12-13

There was a time when God seemed to have allied himself with the rich: welfare, fortune, an abundance of goods, numerous offspring, were seen as signs of his blessing (Dt 28:1-14). Reading the Old Testament we see that the Israelite's ideal was wealth, not poverty.

Little by little, however, the mentality of Israel changes, especially as a result of the preaching of the prophets. Wealth, many began to think, more than a blessing of God, is often a source of problems, abuse, exploitation of workers, deception, skilful machinations, injustices. The poor are no longer considered unhappy because of their impiety, but victims in the hands of the powerful. To the unhappy, Micah cries out in indignation, “stripping the skin of the body, the flesh of the bones” (Miq 3:2).

Zephaniah lives a few years before the destruction of Jerusalem, in a period of social and political chaos. Although of bourgeois origin, the prophet goes against the dignitaries of the court, against the merchants, against the ungodly (cf. Sof 1:8-12) and against all those who commit injustices. It threatens an imminent punishment of God and, as the last possibility of salvation invites them to “conversion to the Lord.”

In today's reading, the prophet clarifies what it means and directs an invitation to all: “Seek the Lord, all you humble of the land, who have observed his law; seek justice, seek humility” (v. 3). To convert means becoming like the humble, like the poor.

It is the first time in the Bible that the word “poor” is used with a new connotation: it indicates not only as a social and economic situation but, above all, an inner religious attitude. For Zephaniah, poor is he who, having no security, trusts entirely in God and submits to his will.

On the day of punishment, says the prophet, God will allow a “humble (poor) people without resources to survive in the land, a remnant of Israel who will seek refuge in the name of the Lord” (vv. 12-13).

After Zephaniah, this new meaning of the term “poor” was very fortunate. The spirituality of “poverty” enjoyed an increasing development, giving rise to a great number of Psalms in which the word “poor” is used as a synonym for pious, just, God-fearing. It is in the context of this spiritual movement that we must place the message of Jesus.

Second Reading: 1 Corinthians 1:26-31

We had indicated last Sunday what the problems of the community of Corinth were: discord, divisions, envy, jealousy. How could they have fallen so low under such an initially fervent community? Paul

responds: it has happened because the destroying spirit of competitiveness has been infiltrated among Christians; each seeks to dominate others, to be superior, to be “rich.”

How does God judge those who behaves like this?

The reading indicates his preferences: God does not choose the rich but the poor, the marginalized, those who count nothing. To prove this, Paul argues, it is enough to consider the provenance of the members of the community of Corinth: there are no nobles, few are rich, aristocrats, scholars, gifted with a great culture. Almost all are poor, some live in misery. This is a sign of the preferences of God who chooses the little ones, shows a predilection for the insignificant in the eyes of the world to enrich them with their gifts.

Gospel: Matthew 5:1-12

A human being has always cultivated a desire to meet God, to question him, to know his thoughts, to find out his plans.

How to find him? Where can we meet him?

In ancient times it was believed that the ideal place would be the peaks of the mountains. All nations had their sacred mountains—meeting places between heaven and earth, the abode of the gods and goal of human ascent—for the Greeks, Olympus; for the inhabitants of Mesopotamia, Ararat; for the Ugarits, the Tzaphon.

Israel also shared this belief. Abraham, Moses, and Elijah had their strongest spiritual experiences on the mountains: Moria, Horeb, and Mount Carmel.

Matthew places the first discourse of Jesus on the mountain. Christian devotion has identified this place with the hill overlooking Capernaum.

The nuns who guard it have turned it into an oasis of peace, meditation, and prayer. Strolling under the majestic trees, greeted by the rustle of leaves blowing in the breeze coming down from the snowy peaks of Lebanon, contemplating from above the lake that Jesus and his disciples crossed so many times, one feels almost naturally induced to raise the eyes to the sky and the thought to God.

No matter how impressive this experience is, the mountain referred to by Matthew should not be understood in a geographical sense but in its theological significance.

More than a real place, “the mountain” in the Bible refers to any place or time when we dispose ourselves to meet the Lord and to accept his word.

We can visualize the scene. Jesus detaches himself from the plain, a symbol of the society where—in the words of the Ecclesiastes—“all that is done, all that succeeds, results from rivalry with the neighbor: all is meaningless and chasing the wind” (Eccl 4:4). He climbs the mountain where the judging criteria and proposed models of life are radically different: they are those of God.

The scale of values established in the plains is, in broad terms, as follows: the first place to health, then family, professional success, bank account and friends. Even God and the saints—of course—are placed in the ranking, but rather at the bottom, as useful supports of previous values that are really at heart.

Will the person who lives his own life according to these ideals be successful?

What does God think of it?

To avoid the risk of focusing on disappointing goals and wasting one's existence, it is necessary to confront his judgment.

Which scale of values is proposed on the mountain?

Today's liturgy invites us to reflect on the proposals of blessedness made by Jesus. They are the ones that the saints in heaven have put into practice and that the saints of earth, encouraged by their example, are encouraged to follow.

Blessed are the poor in spirit

It is hard to say in how many ways this beatitude has been interpreted.

Someone referred it to the miserable, the beggars, the exploited as if they were the kind of people God is pleased with and therefore should be left in their state, indeed, it should be ensured that all become like them!

It is, of course, about an absurd, deviant interpretation. The humanity dreamed by God is not the one in which his children are poor, but one in which "no one is poor" (Acts 4:34).

Others believe that the "poor in spirit" are those who, while maintaining the possession of their property, are detached from them and generous in bestowing offerings to the less fortunate.

But alms—even recommended in some (rare) biblical texts—do not introduce into the world the "new justice;" it does not solve the root problem of the equitable division of assets because the concept believes in the existence of the rich and poor on earth.

The principle of "to each his own" that underpins our justice seems wise and sensible. But it stems from a false premise, derives from the assumption that something belongs to a person, while, in fact, everything is of God: "The Lord's is the earth and its fullness, the universe and its inhabitants" (Ps 24:1). A person is only an administrator of goods, and s/he will be called to render an account of this administration.

From the false relationship with the goods of this world, rise the evil instincts of possessing, accumulating and using goods only for oneself. All the evils: wars, violence, disagreements, jealousy ensue from there (1 Tim 6:10). The whole creation is, therefore "groaning in pain and begs to be renewed and redeemed" (Rom 8:19-25).

All possessive adjectives that we use express an erroneous conception of reality: if all is of God, it makes no sense to talk about mine, yours and not even of ours because everything is of the creator.

The biblical image of the world is that of the banquet hall where the Lord calls each of his children from the moment he called him/her to life.

The person is a table companion who rejoices with the brothers/sisters of the gifts that the Father freely makes available to all. Whoever manages them as one's own property commits a theft? Life itself does not belong to man; it is of God and is a gift that must be offered for love.

In respect of goods, Jesus never assumed the attitude of contempt that characterized the cynical philosophers. For him, the "dishonest wealth" also becomes good when it is distributed to the poor (Lk 16:19). However, although he never condemned it, he regarded it as a threat, "an obstacle—insurmountable for many—to enter the kingdom of heaven" (Mt 19:23). The more a person is favored, the more goods one has, the more one is tempted to tie one's heart with them, keep them for oneself and employ them selfishly.

From those who want to follow him—from those who want to be holy—Jesus asks for total detachment. "None of you may become my disciple if he/she doesn't give up everything he/she has" (Lk 14:33).

It is in the context of this essential requirement to share all that is available to us from God that the beatitude should be read.

Jesus does not exalt poverty as such. By adding the specification in spirit, he makes it clear that not all the poor are blessed. Only the ones who, by free choice, strip themselves of all and manage the assets according to God's plan are blessed.

The poor in spirit are those who decide not to possess anything for themselves and make available to others all that they receive.

Mind you: the poor according to the gospel is not the one who has nothing, but he/she who does not keep anything for himself/herself.

Whoever has had more is considered rich, if he/she becomes haughty, humiliates the less gifted, and employs one's own ability to oppress others. If he/she spends himself/herself for others and puts himself/herself at the service of those who need him/her is poor in spirit.

Someone who is miserable need not be "poor in spirit." S/he is not, if s/he curses herself/himself and others; if s/he attempts to improve her/his own condition with violence and deceit; if s/he thinks for oneself by losing interest in others, or if s/he cultivates the dream of winning the prestigious position of the rich, one day.

Voluntary poverty is for all, the renunciation of the selfish use of all property that one owns is not something optional, not a counsel reserved to some who want to be heroes or more perfect than others. This is what distinguishes a saint, every Christian.

The promise that accompanies the beatitude does not refer to a distant future. It does not guarantee entry into heaven after death, but announces an immediate joy: for theirs is the kingdom of heaven. From the moment one makes the choice to become and to remain poor, one enters the “kingdom of heaven,” and belongs to the family of saints.

This beatitude is not a message of resignation, but of hope: no one will be in need when all will become “poor in spirit,” when they will put the gifts they have received from God in the service of others, as does God, “the Holy One” who, while possessing everything, is infinitely poor: he holds nothing back, gives everything, even his Son.

Blessed are those who suffer

For centuries in the church, an asceticism that exalted pain as a means of uniting oneself more closely to the sufferings of Christ was preached. It attracted legions of saints and awakened precious spiritual energies, but has also spread the mistaken belief that suffering is pleasing to God.

It does not. Suffering dehumanizes and the Lord cannot be pleased with an offer that disfigures the face of his children. Jesus—quoting the prophet Hosea—said that God desires love, not sacrifice (Mt 9:13).

What does he mean then when he proclaims blessed are the “afflicted”? The term he uses is well known to those familiar with the Bible. The “afflicted” spoken of in the book of the prophet Isaiah are those who do not have a house to live in, no fields to cultivate because the legacy of their fathers has been usurped by strangers. They are those who have to put themselves at the service of unscrupulous landowners; suffer injustice, abuse of power, embezzlement, and humiliation (Is 61:7).

To these brokenhearted, who sit on ashes wearing mourning garments (Is 61:3) the prophet addresses a message of hope. God—he assures—is about to intervene, he will reverse the situation and eliminate the causes of mourning: “cheer up those who mourn in Zion, give them a garland instead of ashes, oil of gladness instead of mourning, and festal clothes instead of despair” (Is 61:3).

In the synagogue at Nazareth, Jesus applied to himself this oracle. He proclaimed that he had come to fulfill this promise of God (Lk 4:21).

The “afflicted” that Heaven regards blessed are those who are attentive and sensitive to the immense cry of pain that rises from the world. “They weep with those who weep” (Rom 12:15), but do not resign themselves in the face of evil and suffering. They expect salvation from God and his word.

They will be comforted in the kingdom of God—of which Jesus, the Holy One, has laid the foundation and that the saints work together to build. There, all the situations that cause pain and tears will be erased.

Blessed are the meek

The adjective “meek” evokes the idea of a resigned person who does not react to provocations and passively accepts the injustices without complaint.

Is this the person who shuns every conflict (revealing a weak personality) who is beatified?

The term “meek” used by Jesus is taken from the Old Testament and, more precisely, from Psalm 37 where those deprived of their rights, liberty are called “the meek ones.” They are poor because the powerful have stolen their fields, houses, and even their sons and daughters. They are forced to suffer injustice without even being able to protest.

They do not give up, but they refuse to resort to violence to restore justice. They do not let themselves be guided by anger; they do not feed the resentment and the desire for revenge. They trust in God and await the coming of his kingdom.

Theirs is not, however, a passive waiting as that of those waiting for the bus; it is active; it translates into concrete commitment.

Jesus is the model of true meekness (Mt 11:29; 21:5). He certainly was not a weak, timid, or shy person. He has experienced dramatic conflicts, but confronted them with the provisions of the heart that characterize the “meek ones.” He repudiated violence, loved those who opposed it; by being patient, tolerant and becoming the servant of all.

Holy are those who cultivate the dreams of God on earth and, with Jesus—the Holy One—undertake to achieve them, giving evidence against those who oppose them, with the same “meekness” of the Master.

The Promise: they will inherit the earth. They will receive from God a new land; they will build with him a new world, truly human.

A dream?

Yes, but God and the saints do not allow themselves to be persuaded by the evil one who tries to convince them that God’s promises will never come true. They do not resign themselves to the often bleak reality in which they are called to operate and maintain firmly that hope which Paul qualifies with the Greek term *hupomoné*, the characteristic of semi-precious stones that resist any pressure (1 Thes 1:3).

Blessed are those who hunger and thirst for righteousness

Hunger and thirst are the most basic biological needs. It is with the same passion—Jesus recommends—that his disciples should hunger for “justice.”

What is justice?

Human justice states that all people are treated according to what they deserve: the good people are rewarded; the guilty are punished and the innocent released. “Executing justice” is actually synonymous to sending to the gallows.

Is this the justice of which we must be hungry and thirsty?

The adjective “just” can be applied to God, but with great caution, because one runs the risk of transforming the Lord into a performer of judgments and guarantor of morality with promises of rewards and threats of punishment.

The Bible often speaks of God’s justice, but always and only as a synonym of kindness, never in the sense of our distributive justice.

God is just, not because he compensates according to the merits, but because, with his love, he makes righteous those who are evil. He is just because “he desires all people to be saved and to come to the knowledge of the truth” (1 Tim 2:4).

For us, “justice is done” means that the culprit is punished. For God, justice is done when he manages to make a wicked righteous, or when he saves a sinner from the abyss of guilt.

Nobody like Jesus has longed so much so that this justice would be established in the world.

To the disciples who invited him to eat, he replied: “My food is to bring to completion the work of him who sent me” (Jn 4:34). Only the righteousness of God could satisfy his hunger.

He announced the word that made people just and there were so many people who needed to hear it that he had no time even to eat (Mk 6:31).

Saints are those who share with Jesus his own hunger and thirst for the salvation of his brothers and sisters.

The promise: they shall be filled. They will experience—already here on earth—the joy of God and of the angels of heaven who have more joy over one sinner that is made just over ninety-nine who have no need of repentance (Lk 15:7).

Blessed are those who do works of mercy

This beatitude seems to fit itself in the conflict between patience and desire to punish the culprits. It seems an invitation to let compassion and forgiveness prevail always.

This is certainly one of the aspects of “mercy” and agrees well with the recommendation of Jesus: “Be merciful, just as your Father is merciful. Judge not lest you be judged: condemn not, and you will not be condemned: forgive, and you shall be forgiven” (Lk 6:36-37). But this does not exhaust the richness of the biblical term.

In the Bible “mercy” rather than a feeling of pity, is an action in favor of those who need help. The clearest example is that of the Samaritan—the Greek text says—he has made mercy towards the man attacked by bandits (Lk 10:37).

The rabbis of Jesus’ time taught that God is merciful because he does works of mercy and they specify: “God clothed the naked—when he covered Adam and Eve with leaves; (Gen 3:21)—so you have to clothe the naked. He visited the sick—In fact, he visited Abraham when he was suffering from

circumcision and visited the barren Sarah, (Gen 18:1)—so you have to visit the sick. He comforted those who were grieving—when he comforted Isaac after the death of his father, (Gen 25:11)—so you have to comfort those who are grieving. He buried the dead—he was the one who buried Moses, (Deut 34:6)—so you have to bury the dead.”

Merciful are the saints who, faced with the needs of a person, feel the emotion of the heart of God and intervene, performing works of mercy, as God did.

The Promise: they will find mercy. In the new world, in the kingdom of God, they too, when they need help, will meet brothers/sisters always willing to reach out to them, indeed, to give their lives to help them.

Blessed are the pure in heart

Purity was one of the most marked characteristics of the Jewish religion. Any contact with the pagan cults, with something that might recall death and was unclean, had to be avoided.

From this requirement of purity, there arose prohibitions, the detailed provisions of the rabbis obliging them to stay away from what was perceived as contrary to the holiness of God.

Since transgressions were inevitable, it was necessary to obsessively resort to purification rites, ablutions, and sacrifices (Mk 7:3-4).

Jesus is not interested in these practices. He demands purity of heart. There is nothing external that makes a person unclean. It is only what comes from the heart that can make one unclean (Mt 15:17-20).

The pure in heart are those who have an undivided heart, those who do not love both God and idols.

A person, who serves two masters, whose conduct that does not agree with the faith one professes, who loves God but keeps resentment toward a brother or sister in one's heart, who never commits bad actions but is adulterous in his heart, has an impure heart (Mt 5:28).

The promise: they shall see God. To them is given the blessed experience of trusting abandonment in the arms of God.

Blessed are those who are committed to peace

Among the works of mercy recommended by the rabbis of Jesus' time, to bring peace, to reconstruct harmony among persons, was the most meritorious. Every action that aims at restoring peace—it was said—attracts the blessings of God.

Blessed is certainly the one who, without resorting to violence, commits all his energy to put an end to wars and conflicts. Blessed is he who comes between the contenders and tries to convince them to dialogue, harmony, and peace.

But in the Bible, the word “peace” (shalom) is not just the absence of war. It indicates the total wellbeing, implies harmony with God, with others and with themselves, prosperity, justice, health, and joy. “Peacemakers” are all those who are committed to making this life as good as possible for every person.

The most beautiful of the promises is given to these saints: God considers them his children.

Blessed are the persecuted for righteousness

There are disasters that strike unexpectedly: fatality, illness, and misfortune can happen to anyone. Other sufferings are the result of foolish or unethical behavior and we look for these!

There is a third kind of tribulations: those that we do not want, but we have to take into account—because they are an inevitable price to pay—if we choose to follow Christ.

Jesus did not delude his disciples; he has not promised honors and achievements, has not assured them of people’s approval and consent and insistently and clearly repeated that adhesion to him entails persecution: “If the head of the family has been called Beelzebub, how much more the members of the family” (Mt 10:25). And again: “They will lay their hands on you and persecute you; you will be delivered to the synagogues and put in prison, and for my sake, you will be brought before kings and governors” (Lk 21:12). “When they persecute you in one town, flee to the next” (Mt 10:23). The wisdom of God said: “I will send prophets and apostles and these people will kill and persecute some of them. But the present generation will have to answer for the blood of all the prophets that has been shed since the foundation of the world” (Lk 11:49-50).

Persecution is the uniform that distinguishes the disciple. Paul is very explicit: “All who want to serve God in Christ Jesus will be persecuted” (2 Tim 3:12).

How come? We would expect that a Christian—a messenger of peace and hope—is to be welcomed with open arms, with joy and gratitude.

Instead, the proclamation of the gospel creates conflicts. The reason is that the old world order is incompatible with the kingdom of God and does not give up peacefully. It reacts by attacking those it wants to have disappeared.

Christ paid with his life for the loyalty to his mission, and his disciples must not expect a different treatment: “A servant is not greater than his master. If they persecuted me, they will persecute you, too” (Jn 15:20).

The persecution of the righteous is often spoken of in the Old Testament. In the Psalms, the righteous ask God: “Deliver me from the grip of my persecutors” (Ps 7:2); “When will you judge my persecutors? When they persecute me, help me” (Ps 119:84,86). Jeremiah is opposed, slandered, and imprisoned in a cistern.

In the Old Testament, however, persecution is considered bad and the person who suffers it cannot be happy until God intervenes to end it.

In the New Testament, the perspective changes. He who suffers for his faithfulness to the Lord is proclaimed blessed for the very fact of being persecuted.

Persecution is not a sign of failure, but of success. It is a cause of joy because it is the proof that one is pursuing the right choice, according to the “wisdom of God.”

It is inevitable that those who propose a society based on the principles taught “on the mountain” are persecuted. They introduce into the world the antibodies of service that attack the viruses of power. They do not give a chance to these viruses, although camouflaged or hidden under sacred trappings.

Whoever feels his position and prestige threatened by the coming of the kingdom of God reacts with violence, if necessary.

The saints never had an easy life: their fate has been sealed from the moment they agreed to act as lambs.

Subjected to persecution, they have not succumbed to the temptation to behave like wolves and have not strayed from the behavior suggested by the Master: “Love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you” (Mt 5:44) and by Paul: “Bless those who persecute you” (Rom 12:14).

**There is a video available by Fr. Fernando Armellini with commentary for today’s Gospel:
<http://www.bibleclaret.org/videos>**

- See more at: <http://www.bibleclaret.org/celebrating-the-word-of-god#sthash.e9wZSUzI.dpuf>

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