

Commentary on Sunday Scripture – Year A

4th Sunday of Ordinary Time

First reading:

(Zephaniah 2.3; 3.12-13)

Blessed by the Lord

Before the Babylonian Exile, Israel tended to equate material prosperity with divine blessing: those who prospered did so because of the Lord's blessing; those who did not must in some way be blameworthy. The Exile put an end to all that, and the consequent puzzlement is visible in the Book of Job.

These verses from the prophecy of Zephaniah show the new and more satisfying analysis: it is the humble of the Lord who will receive divine blessing, those who seek refuge in the Name or Power of the Lord and recognize their entire dependence on him. The nation of Israel was the plaything of the great powers on either side, dominated first by one, then by the other.

This is the spirituality of the powerless Remnant, not giving themselves airs or trusting in their own strength. It is perfectly and consciously exemplified in the personnel of the Lukan Infancy Narratives, where Zechariah and Elizabeth, Mary and Joseph, Simeon and Anna humbly obey the law and await the salvation that is to come to them from the Lord. This spirit was not the strong suit of the Corinthians to whom Paul writes! It is partly exemplified also in the Beatitudes that will form the gospel reading.

Question:

What, then, is true Christian humility? Is it to say that I am no good at anything, or to recognize my talents and be grateful for them?

Second reading:

(1 Corinthians 1.26-31)

Reversal of Values

The Corinthians seem to have been particularly pleased with themselves, so that Paul mercilessly lavishes his sarcasm on them. In their bravado and their complacency, they were happy to rely on their own resources, and expected to be saved by them. Paul repeats to them the lesson of Zephaniah.

The public reading of the letter must have embarrassed those at whom it was aimed, and the vigour of Paul's criticism was perhaps the reason why his relationships with this community continued stormy for some time.

For us, however, the positive teaching is a treasure, that Christ is for us our wisdom, our strength, our holiness and our freedom. Only through Christ can we achieve our ambitions and grow to full human maturity, by participating in these qualities of Christ. Once incorporated into Christ by baptism, we already share in his wisdom, holiness and strength, and even in his freedom, if only we rely on that and not on ourselves.

Paul goes on to say that Christ is the Wisdom of God, a teaching elaborated in the later epistles (possibly written not by Paul himself) to the Colossians and Ephesians.

Question:

Isn't it a blessing that none of us is conceited or cliquish?

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Gospel:

(Matthew 5.1-12)

The Beatitudes

These eight blessings stand at the head of the Sermon on the Mount, pointing out eight ways in which we can welcome God into our lives. They are ways of living out God's blessing. The first and the last knit them all together with 'theirs is the kingdom of heaven'.

Luke also begins his Sermon on the Plain with four such blessings - only his blessings are more on those who are materially poor and in need, whereas Matthew's concentrate on the spiritual attitudes required of the Christian, 'poor in spirit, hunger and thirst for justice'.

Jesus came to proclaim the Kingship of his Father, and these are ways of living it. For each of them, do you know someone who exemplifies the attitude? Which is your own favourite?

For most of them there are gospel incidents in which Jesus sums them up, like the entry into Jerusalem on a donkey as the gentle king, or the love he shows in his welcome to sinners, or his bringing peace to those tortured by disease or contempt, or his purity of heart in his single-minded preoccupation with his Father's will, and, finally, his acceptance of persecution for what he knew to be right.

Question:

Are any of these qualities more basic than others?
