

4th Sunday in Ordinary Time (A)
(Zephaniah 2:3; 3:12-13 / Matthew 5:1-12)
29.01.2023
Justice & Kingdom

The Catechism of the Catholic Church declares that the Beatitudes “are at the heart of Jesus’ preaching” (n. 1716). They “reveal the goal of human existence, the ultimate end of human acts: God calls us to his own beatitude” (n. 1719).

Thus the 9 beatitudes put preachers under pressure to speak about what is at the heart of Jesus’ life and ministry.

As it is impossible for any preacher to go through all the beatitudes, today, I would like to draw our attention on the fact that St Matthew structured the first 8 beatitudes around 2 elements: justice and kingdom. The 1st and the 8th beatitudes both mention the kingdom of heaven and the 4th and the 8th beatitudes both deal with what is right.

Allow me to read again the 3 beatitudes: “How happy are the poor in spirit, theirs is the kingdom of heaven; happy are those who hunger and thirst for what is right, they shall be satisfied; happy those who are persecuted in the cause of right: theirs is the kingdom of heaven.”

“Happy are those who hunger and thirst for what is right, they shall be satisfied.”

In the context of the Sermon of the Mount, the meaning of the word “right” refers to the right conduct required by God. To be right, to be righteous means to behave in a way which incarnates Jesus’ teaching.

It is worth observing that Jesus does not congratulate those who are righteous; instead he lifts up those who are hungering and thirsting for conformity to the will of God. It is implied that what is right must be ever sought, must always be a goal which lies ahead.

This beatitude reminds us of the need for great humility in the way we evaluate the depth of our relationship with God, the evangelical quality of our lives, and our relationship with others.

We must be humble and recognise that we will always be in a state of longing for a greater and deeper knowledge of God’s love for us, in need of a greater resemblance to Christ.

Here the words of St Francis de Sales encourage us: “I am well content that you begin again every day: there is no better way to perfect the spiritual life than always to begin again and never to think you have done enough.”

The problem is precisely when we think that we have done enough, when we become self-righteous, when we consider that we have reached the goal. We have to remember the parable of the Pharisee and the tax collector in the temple. St Luke tells us that it is addressed to those “who are confident of their own righteousness and look down on everyone else” (18:9).

To hunger and thirst for what is right, even to suffer for it, means that our lives are never completely evangelised and that our fidelity to the Gospel will sometimes make us choose to tread a narrow path (cf. Mt 7:14) and lead us where we would not like to go (cf. Jn 21:18).

The beatitudes set before us guidelines against self-reliance and self-centredness. Poverty in spirit, gentleness, the ability to mourn, to show mercy, to be pure in heart, to work for peace... all make us depend on God and become like him. The reward promised in the last beatitude is God himself who gives himself to us and restores in us his image and likeness, who makes us just as he is just.

The link between justice and the kingdom of God is at the heart of our discipleship. Jesus warns us: “I tell you, unless your justice exceeds that of the scribes and Pharisees, you will never enter the kingdom of heaven” (Mt 5:20).

The call “to act justly”, “to do justice”, “to execute justice”, in regard to the poor, the oppressed, the marginalised is present in almost all the books of the Bible. It is a requirement, a commandment from God.

We should be acutely aware that it is not sufficient to worship regularly and to love one’s neighbours or relatives if at the same time one is acquiescing in social injustice and doing nothing about the politics of life.

The kingdom of heaven is promised to those who are persecuted for what is just because it is a kingdom where justice reigns. Everything in our society, in our Churches or in our families that is not right hinders us from being in a just relationship with God and with one another. When we tacitly or actively encourage structures, relationships or institutions which are not just we prevent the kingdom of God from growing within and around us.

From this perspective, it is important to consider the synod on synodality as a matter of justice and to commit ourselves to pray and to work for all those involved in the synodal process. The synod offers all of us an opportunity to reflect and act together so that the Catholic Church may become a more just and more truly evangelical community. As the prophet reminds us, we are called to “let justice roll down like waters, and righteousness like an ever-flowing stream” (Am 5:24) in the world.

The kingdom is a reality which will be fully realised in the future, when the Lord will come in glory (cf. Lk 23:42) yet it is “among us” (Lk 17:21). It is visible each time we do justice, love kindness, and walk humbly with our God (cf. Mic 6:8).

Blessed are we when we hunger and thirst for justice. Blessed are we if with gentleness, mercy and humility we work for the building up of the kingdom of God in this world which God loves so much (cf. Jn 3:16).