

Fourth Sunday in Ordinary Time, A – January 29, 2017 – Very Rev. Bryan W. Jerabek, J.C.L.
Cathedral of St. Paul, Birmingham, Ala. – 5pm Vigil, 8:30 & 11am Sunday Masses – 800 words

Many people today seek a God who will deliver them from difficulty, and trials – a God who will make their lives easy; who will bless them with wealth; a God who is not very demanding morally. What they effectively seek is a God who will fulfill them here and now – in this world and on their terms. Heaven (and hell) are abstract and perhaps even meaningless concepts for such people. There is a Christ without the cross; a Christ who is much different than the one whom we learn about in the gospel. Today’s gospel passage, in fact, directly challenges the ideas of such people.

In preaching his Beatitudes or eight promises of blessing, Christ challenges us not just to see the present in a very particular way but also to look beyond the present to eternal life. He effectively tells us that God does not extract us from the challenges of life but is present with us in them. For example, “Blessed are those who hunger and thirst for righteousness”: in situations where we see injustice, God is there with us as we hunger for justice and truth and he even works through our efforts to bring that about. He doesn’t just wave his hand and take the problem away. Or another of the eight, “Blessed are the clean of heart”: in the struggle for purity of heart and intention – in that struggle for self-control and virtue – God is with us to help us; again, he doesn’t just watch us from afar and much less does he wave a hand, so to speak, and take the problem away. We could go through each of the eight beatitudes from this perspective and see that what Christ is communicating to us this Sunday is that God is with us as we grow, as we fight, as we suffer, and as we ultimately become “poor in spirit”, recognizing that without him we can truly do nothing.¹

Thus the Beatitudes challenge us to find God in the present moment. But as I said, they also teach us to look beyond, to eternal life, for each one of them is accompanied by a sort of reversal of fortunes. For example, “Blessed are they who mourn” – those who suffer grief and sorrow due to some sort of loss: “for they will be comforted” – in the future age, when God will have wiped away every tear, they will experience an unspeakable consolation which perhaps they never even glimpsed in their life on earth. “Blessed are the peacemakers” – those who strive to overcome division and strife and those things which separate us from God; “for they will be called children of God” – they will have shown themselves to be God-like in their patient struggle. The Lord is with those who live according to these blessings here and now; and they will possess God in his fullness and glory in the Kingdom of Heaven.

The entrance antiphon for this Mass gives us a certain orientation that will help us more effectively to live out the beatitudes. Quoting Psalm 105 it said, “Let the hearts that seek the Lord rejoice; turn to the Lord and his strength; constantly seek his face”. If you want something easy to remember throughout the coming week, just focus on those last four words: “constantly seek his face”. Do I seek out the face of God – do I look for God – throughout each of my days, in all that I do? In my work, in my play, at home, out and about, with my family, and in my solitude? The Lord is always near; whether we are experiencing joy, sorrow, or anything in-between, he is there with us as well. Do we live those moments with him? This is the challenge that Christ gives us this Sunday, as his voice echoes down to us from that mountainside where he first preached.

“Constantly seek his face”: for it is in living each moment with the Lord that we are already blessed, and will find that fulfillment that we seek forever in the life to come. Indeed, isn’t it a much different thing, to live constantly in the pursuit of God, rather than only turning to

¹ Cf. John 15:5.

him at key decision points? The famous question is, “What would Jesus do?”; but we might do better to ask, “How did Jesus live?” – and in meditating upon the example he gives us in the gospel, we realize the answer is: he always sought out the face of his Father, and sought to that face to us. “Constantly seek his face”. If we meditate on these words in the coming days and weeks, we will realize some progress on our spiritual journey: progress that makes us blessed now – and is a pledge of unending blessing in the kingdom of heaven.