

#### FOURTH SUNDAY IN ORDINARY TIME

Recently I had a pleasant conversation with a young field artillery sergeant (well, young to me, no doubt not young to 18 and 19 year old privates!). In the course of the conversation, he told me that St. Barbara being the Patron Saint of Field Artillery is still part of common field artillery lore. I was pleased that, even in a rough and ready way, the basic story of St. Barbara is still getting told. As I explained back in December, St. Barbara was a martyr of the early Church, killed for her uncompromising and vigorous Faith in our Lord, Jesus Christ. The account of her life and earthly death (heavenly birthday!) was written centuries after her time, so it doesn't have the same status as the eyewitness accounts regarding such martyrs as Sts. Felicity and Perpetua. That doesn't mean that the account of her life and death is worthless, however. Taking something with a grain of salt is quite different from disregarding it altogether. According to the account, St. Barbara's own father, an unnaturally unpleasant old man, personally chopped her head off, atop a very large hill, and was subsequently blasted from this life by a bolt of lightning on his way down from the hill. Given that there are unnaturally unpleasant old men (sometimes in quite high places), that people are sometimes decapitated, and that occasionally people are struck dead by lightning, the story of St. Barbara is certainly not inherently unbelievable. In any case, it was from the unnaturally unpleasant old man being blasted by a bolt from the blue that St. Barbara came to be regarded as the Patron Saint of Field Artillery. I know that some people are a bit scandalized by the story, but I don't see why. God is just. He desires the salvation of all, but also will not let people get away with wickedness.

Today's Gospel is from chapter five of St. Matthew, the start of the Lord Jesus' Sermon on the Mount, called "The Beatitudes" The version of the Beatitudes in St. Matthew's Gospel is the one that we teach to children. The version in chapter six of St. Luke's Gospel accompanies every Beatitude, announcing the reward of the just, with a Woe, announcing the punishment of the wicked. Today we are looking at St. Matthew's Beatitudes, focused on what is obviously good news, that those who are, by God's Grace, righteous, will be rewarded. Even as we look at St. Matthew's Beatitudes, however, it is good to keep in mind the reminder from St. Luke that the deliberately wicked will not get away with their wickedness.

The focus in St. Matthew's Gospel is on those who can be called "Makarios", a word found 50 times in the New Testament (13 times in Matthew), meaning "fortunate" or "blessed". In this Sunday's Gospel, the Lord Jesus declares what a truly good, fortunate, blessed, and happy life looks like.

"Seeing the crowds, He went up on the mountain, and when He sat down, His disciples came to Him, and He began to teach them"

Notice three things from this verse. He went up the mountain, He sat down, and His disciples came to Him.

Jesus went up the mountain because, in the biblical view, fundamental law is given from the mountain, where God, symbolically, makes contact with humanity. Through the prophet Moses, God gave the fundamental laws of human social life, the Ten Commandments, on Mount Sinai.

Through the Incarnate Son, God gives the fundamental laws of human spiritual life, the Beatitudes, on the Mount of the Beatitudes.

Jesus sat down. In the biblical view, and the classical Greco-Roman view as well, an authorized teacher, given authority to teach the public, sat down to teach. Anyone with an opinion could stand and speak his mind, but to sit and lecture was a sign of having a right to teach. Sitting was a mark of authority. Jesus sits, not just for the Beatitudes, but for the entire Sermon on the Mount (chapters 5-7 of St. Matthew), because He has authority from His Father to teach the Christian way of life. When we hear the words of the Sermon the Mount, we are hearing words spoken with divine authority, and disregard these words at our own peril.

His disciples came to Him. The Sermon on the Mount is addressed to people who are already convinced that Jesus has divine teaching authority. To the general crowds, He speaks through miracles, to get their attention, and through parables, to get them to think. To those who have decided to pay attention to Jesus' words, and who are already thinking about His message, He addresses the Sermon on the Mount. The Sermon on the Mount is not for convincing people to become Christians. The Sermon on the Mount is for showing Christians how they are to live and pray.

Blessed are the poor in Spirit. The poor in spirit are those who are not chained to worldly goods. Whatever their social or economic position, they are content not to have what they don't have; and they use what they do have for the glory of God, for their necessities, and for their neighbor's good. They have reduced their dependence on worldly well being, and developed their awareness of being dependent day by day on God's Grace, both to will good and to do it. Many of the poor in spirit are also materially poor, though some may actually have worldly wealth. In either case, they are spiritually rich, precisely because they don't put much value on material wealth. They are spiritually rich because they value Faith, Hope, and Love, those three. They have put their treasure in Heaven; and, when this world passes away, the Kingdom of Heaven will be theirs. They will hear the words "Come, o Blessed by My Father, inherit the Kingdom prepared for you from the foundation of the world" (Matthew 25:34)

Blessed are they who mourn. It is far better to be capable of tears than to be unable to feel sorrow. The Romans used the phrase "Lacrimae Rerum", the tears of things. The world has many things that demand tears from anyone who has a heart. Further, disciples of the Lord have let the Spirit of Jesus show them their sins, the bad things they have done, and the good things they have failed to do. For both of those, tears are fitting. Tears for all the sadness in the world, and tears for our own sins, are holy tears, to which God will respond with comfort. In the end, when this world has passed away and the Kingdom of God has been established, those tears will be wiped away. "For the Lamb in the midst of the Throne will be their Shepherd, and He will guide them to springs of living water; and God will wipe away every tear from their eyes" (Revelation 7:17)

Blessed are the meek. Just as the poor in spirit includes many who are materially poor as well as few who are materially wealthy, so also the meek includes many who are materially weak, as well as a few who are materially powerful. The meek are those who are aware that true strength is Faith, Hope, and Love. They put this world's illusory power, however little or much

they have of it, at the service of Faith, Hope, and Love. Not too long ago I saw a powerfully built high school kid flexing his thick right arm, displaying below his massive biceps the words “Ephesians 6:10” Opening my Bible (one should never let it be too far away), I read “Finally, be strong in the Lord, and in the strength of His might”. Not bad, I thought, provided that the kid understands that being strong in the Lord is not a matter of big biceps (pleasant as those can be) but a matter of Faith, Hope, and Love. The meek, knowing that this world’s power is only good if it is used faithfully, hopefully, and lovingly, may be unknown to the world, or they may be as famous as Moses. In either case, they will say, with Lord Jesus Himself, that they are on earth not to be served, but to serve, even if that service means loss of worldly power, or even loss of life. They will see in full truth what St. John the Beloved Disciple saw in vision, “a new Heaven and a new Earth” in which He Who sits upon the Throne will declare “Behold, I make all things new” (Revelation 21: 1,5)

Blessed are they who hunger and thirst for righteousness. These are the disciples of the Lord who just want to do God’s will, nothing more, and nothing less. Later on in the Sermon on the Mount, the Lord Jesus will teach His disciples to pray “Thy Kingdom come, Thy will be done” With those words, His disciples commit themselves to doing His will, simply because it is His will. That desire to do the Lord’s will, merely because it is His will, is what it means to hunger to and thirst for righteousness. To despise God’s will is the essence of sin, and to embrace it is the essence of holiness. There is one destiny for those who despise it, and another for those who embrace it. Thus, the Lord Jesus, giving a warning about those who despise God’s will and refuse to do it, says “they will go away into eternal punishment, but the righteous into Eternal Life” (Matthew 25:46)

Blessed are the merciful. These are first of all, the disciples of the Lord who forgive others as readily as the Lord forgives them. Later on in the Sermon on the Mount, the Lord Jesus will teach His disciples to pray “Forgive us our trespasses, as we forgive those who trespass against us” With these words, His disciples commit themselves to forgive anyone who has harmed or offended them, because they are empowered by Grace to imitate His Divine Mercy. The merciful are also those disciples whom the Lord’s Mercy empowers to be patient with the faults of others, however clueless and annoyingly obtuse those others may be. The merciful are also those disciples whom the Lord’s Mercy empowers to help the needy, charitably and compassionately, without any judgment or condemnation. For those who forgive those who have harmed them, those who are patient with those who annoy them, and those who help those who ask for their help, the Lord makes a promise of full and unreserved forgiveness, because “mercy triumphs over judgment” (James 2:13)

Blessed are the pure in heart. In biblical language, the heart stands for our love. The pure in heart love God, the impure of heart love only the image they have created of themselves. The totally pure of heart love God so absolutely that they, for His sake, are able to love all that He loves, which is all creation. The totally impure of heart love only a particular image of themselves, with an idolatry so intense that they have no idea either of God, or of who they really are. Most of us disciples of the Lord, with His help, are in the process of purifying our hearts, banishing our idolatrous self images, and learning truly to love God with all our heart,

soul, mind and strength. When we do that, we discover our true selves. Until we do that, we love fantasy images of ourselves, such fantasies boiling down to sex, popularity, possessions, or power (usually in some combination). Love of a fantasy self rooted in various libidos produces every imaginable perversity and evil. The pure of heart, with God's assistance, have destroyed these fantasies, and replaced them with the vision of God. In this life, that vision of God is mediated by Faith, as through a mirror, somewhat dimly. In the Kingdom of Heaven, the vision of God will be unmediated. We will see God as He is, in what the Catholic Church calls "The Beatific Vision". The pure of heart "shall see His face, and His Name shall be on their foreheads" (Revelation 22:4)

Blessed are the peacemakers. In Hebrews 12:14 we read "Strive for peace with all men". The peacemakers are those who take that quite seriously, and, God helping, really do strive to live at peace with everyone around them. They do this for a purpose. They make the effort and sacrifice to live in peace with their neighbors so that they can credibly point the way to Jesus Christ, Who alone can give the peace that this world cannot give. The peacemakers can point the way to Jesus Christ, Who is our peace, confidently because they have already begun to experience a peace this world does not give, the peace of knowing where they come from, where they are going, what their life is about, and that their life is worth living. They are willing to make concessions to live in peace with their neighbors, because they have a sure and certain hope that is quite literally out of this world. They have conquered the worst of human vices, the need to get our own way. Having conquered this, by God's Grace, they are promised Eternal Life. "He who conquers shall have this heritage, and I will be His God, and He shall be My son" (Revelation 21:7)

Blessed are those who are persecuted for righteousness sake. To bear public witness to what is right, above all to the most right thing of all, the saving Gospel of our Lord, Jesus Christ, will mean experiencing some degree of slander, abuse, or persecution. The Lord's disciples must expect some degree of slander, abuse, or persecution. That, of course, is not all that they can expect. Despite the hatred they will experience in this passing world, they will experience eternally God's loving Mercy. The fight and the race will pass. The Crown of Righteousness will remain. These are the words of St Paul, "From now on there is laid up for me a Crown of Righteousness, which the Lord, the Righteous Judge, will award to me on that day; and not only to me, but also to all who have loved his appearing" (2 Timothy 4:8)

St. Matthew's Beatitudes show what the lives of disciples, who have allowed themselves to be changed by the power of the Lord Jesus Christ's Death and Resurrection, are like. These Beatitudes challenge us to adopt Jesus' own attitudes towards God, life, and other people. These Beatitudes also carry a promise that can sustain us in times of trouble. St. Luke reminds us that evil will fail and be punished. St. Matthew emphasizes quite strongly that good will triumph, and be rewarded. The Beatitudes tell us what a good, truly Christian life looks like. The lives of the Saints, to which we should pay close attention, remind us that, by God's Grace, many before us have truly lived good Christian lives in this world. We can too, trusting in the promise "Rejoice and be glad, for your reward will be great in Heaven"