

4th Sunday in Ordinary time 29 January 2023

Today's Gospel is part of Jesus' Sermon on the Mount. The Sermon on the Mount is the summary of Jesus' public ministry. In today's Gospel, it is about the Beatitudes, which is the summary of Jesus' Sermon on the Mount. We can see that it is very condensed. This condensation helps us to grasp the core messages of Jesus' public ministry so that we can love it and internalize it with the purpose of living it out in a simple and spontaneous way.

The beginning of each of the Beatitudes is "blessed", and it was translated in The Jerusalem Bible as "happy". In the full biblical meaning, the word "blessed" includes happy. So both translations are acceptable. Apart from the meaning of blessed and happy, the word also means that we are happy because we are chosen by God; and we are blessed because we are a blessing for other people. How beautiful it is that we are chosen for others' blessing. It means that we are not only receivers of God's grace but also givers of God's grace.

In the Beatitudes, we can see that Jesus is a great teacher, who is different from other teachers. In the Gospel, we do not see Jesus pointing finger at us and saying, "You should do..." Instead, we see and hear Jesus gently telling us, "If you are like this, you are blessed." He invites us to practice so that we can experience and taste the blessing. Though Jesus stands at the Mount teaching, in fact, he asks us not to be satisfied with what we have heard but to do what has heard so that we can say and testify that how true Jesus' teaching is. It is a form of prayer.

In this form of prayer, we can pray each of the Beatitudes with our own experience. After finishing the dialogue between one beatitude and our own experience, we then move to the next beatitude, until we finish with all seven beatitudes. The number seven means perfection in the Bible.

Note the paradoxical movements in each of the Beatitudes: "poor in spirit" and "kingdom of heaven"; "mourn" and "comfort"; "gentle or meek" and "inheritance"; "hunger and thirst" and "filled or satisfied"; "merciful" and "receive mercy"; "pure in heart" and "see God"; "peacemakers" and "children of God"; "being persecuted" and "kingdom of heaven"; and "suffering in persecution" and "rejoice and glad". These paradoxical experiences take place in us and in others.

The question is how we understand these paradoxical movements. Do we see the second part of each beatitude as a reward for the first part of the beatitude? Is this the message that Jesus wants to bring across at the Beatitude? If this is the case, then Jesus would not have been different from other teachers and Christianity would not have been different from other religions. What Jesus invites us is to see the Beatitudes as ideals of human behaviour at every level. He shows us the way out of our inner struggles and sufferings. He wants us to be a whole person in body, mind and spirit. Amen.