

Homily for February 3, 2002
4th Sunday in Ordinary Time Cycle A

By Father Charles Bowes

Zephaniah 2:3, 3:12-13
1 Corinthians 1:26-31
Matthew 5:1-12

Good news is bad news, and really bad news is good news because it makes us listen.

If I go to a place of business and am treated well, and the person I need is polite, kind, understanding, and helpful, then I have nothing to tell my coworkers when I get back to my office. They will ask, “Any news?” And my answer will be, “No, everything went well.” But if I go to a place of business and the person I need is a big, pedantic, proud stinker who shouts at me, and I shout back, and we finally shout together, then I have quite a story to tell my fellow workers when I get back.

We like to hear scandals. We love to be able to tell them. We thrive on bad news. It seems to have been the same around Jesus. Check the gospels: they are called good news. Listen to what he, himself, tells people: the king is an immoral man; the tax collectors and administrators are hopeless; his best friend, John, was in jail; the shepherds were hirelings and mercenaries. Housewives were losing their money; children were neglected, scandalized, sick, or dead; the occupying forces were murdering people in the Temple; the priests

were hypocrites; the disciples were without understanding; Judas was a traitor; the only tower mentioned fell, killing a lot of people, sons were lost; sheep were in the wilderness; and finally, Jesus himself was arrested and killed.

It is in that context that Jesus, in the gospel reading of today, Matthew chapter 5, climbs onto a hill and proceeds to speak to people who still expect something comforting and consoling, and what do they hear? Matthew follows a well-established convention of his time by setting out a brief list of the things which would be hallmarks, keystones of Jesus’ teachings – things that would be characteristic of his bad news/good news. It’s the point of departure for everything he will have to say during the course of his public ministry. These introductory lists are called “macarisms,” from the Greek word meaning “to be blessed.” They conventionally begin with the words; “Happy or blessed are those who.” Usually they set out virtues and are familiar to the listener – the kind of thing that was recited week by week in the Temple. But Jesus’ list would have been familiar to no one. How happy are the poor in spirit, the gentle, those who mourn, those who hunger and thirst for righteousness. We’d have been shocked too if we were standing with the crowd on that hillside – more bad news. Jesus lists

the losers, the pitiful poor and the unfortunate as blest. It makes no sense.

Folks, it's not supposed to make sense – it's supposed to make us listen – it's supposed to bring us to the brink of powerlessness so that we have no one else to turn to but God, and enter into a dialog with God where we ask questions about such unreasonable, consistent suffering of ourselves and others: "Lord, where are you in this suffering?" And then, we listen, we shut up, we hearken to whatever feeling or memory or emotion wells up in us as we contemplate the ridiculousness of finding joy in deep sorrow. And if we don't hear an answer right away, we ask again, "Lord, what keeps me from hearing you, or what keeps you from answering me?" And so the dialog continues.

Folks, the people described in the beatitudes are not blessed because their misery is good or their actions praiseworthy; there is no self-satisfaction in what they do, nor is there intrinsic value in being miserable. Their situation, in fact, already reeks of death. Those in whom God's kingdom is apparent, however, are not the right and the fortunate and the self-possessed, but the poor and the persecuted. When things are going well, we can't hear anyone but ourselves. It's in the moments of distress that we are able to listen and to question and enter into dialog with God.

In his glorification, Jesus never ceases to be human, which means that everything human is open to the revelation of God, and by our taking the human seriously, by allowing God to speak in and through this, we not only hear God, we allow God to lead us to wherever that might be – ultimately to glorification with Jesus.

We have to look and to listen real, real hard to see and believe that the glorified Lord is present in bread and wine, and just as truly present in one another and in ourselves. But that's what we do here, at every gathering of Eucharist. We try to listen and see. We have to listen real, real hard to hear the Lord speak through every thought and feeling, sight and sound we experience. But that's what our gathering here is aimed at: to sharpen our ability to see and to hear God's revelation of his love, always and everywhere.

So let us pray, "Good and gracious God, you never cease to speak from the midst of the whirlwind we call life. Open our eyes that we may see, our ears that we may hear your voice and your presence in and through all whose lives we share and touch. We ask this through Christ our Lord."

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