4th Sunday in Ordinary Time + 1 Feb 2026 + Zeph 2:3-3:13 + I Cor 1:26-31 + Mt 5:1-12

Whenever a new pope is elected, the world often pays particular attention to his homily at his first Mass as pope. The assumption is that his first Mass will give an insight into the program of his pontificate: that is, what kind of papacy is this going to be? In John Paul II's first homily, he proclaimed to the world: *Do not be afraid. Open wide the doors for Christ!* And indeed, this was his constant theme throughout his pontificate.

That being the case, we should pay particular attention to today's Gospel, which is the first official "sermon" of Jesus as recorded in Matthew's Gospel. And I think it's fair to say that the "Beatitudes" we just heard not only unveil the "program" of Jesus' earthly ministry, but they reveal the very heart of the person of Jesus Christ. In other words, the message and the person of Jesus Christ are in perfect harmony. So if we really want to *know Him* and not just *about Him*, then the best way to begin is by paying close attention to His teachings.

To begin, we see right away that Jesus is a man like no other, because His teachings are like no one else's. From a purely rational standpoint, they make no sense. Human reason tells us that to be poor, to be in mourning, to hunger and thirst, to be persecuted and insulted and calumniated is anything but a blessing! So either Jesus is out of His mind, or He is going to turn conventional wisdom on its head. Most people at that time went with the former. Even His own relatives said *He is out of His mind* (Mk 3:21)! But as people of faith, blessed with the gift of hindsight, we see the truth is the latter. We know that St. Paul's explanation in our 2nd reading today really is true, that *God chose the foolish of the world to shame the wise.* More on that in a moment.

But the great question remains: how do we make sense of the Beatitudes? Well, the best image I can think of is of putting on a pair of glasses to correct our vision, and the lenses are the very person of Christ. Meaning, Jesus is the one who is *poor in spirit*. His whole life is a series of emptying Himself of all the things that people cling to for security. The comforts of home and family life. A nice house and stable employment. Friends we can count on. A good reputation and respect from others. Leisure time to enjoy the fruits of our labors. Eventually, even His life: Jesus gives it all. The Father is His only lasting possession.

Jesus is the one who mourns. Not over His personal losses (as we would), but He mourns over us. He weeps at the death of His friend Lazarus. Not because He has no hope beyond the grave, but because it wasn't supposed to be like this. There was no sickness and death in God's original plan for creation. He also weeps during His final approach to Jerusalem, over its hardness of heart, saying: *If this day you only knew what makes for peace…For the days are coming upon you when your enemies will…not leave one stone upon another within you because you did not recognize the time of your visitation!* (Lk 19:42, 44). And this warning came true when the Romans destroyed the city in 70AD. In other words, Jesus weeps over the consequences of all human sins, which is ultimately death and destruction.

Jesus is *meek.* This is not an easy word to translate into English, but it means something like "strength through gentleness." The same Jesus who took a child into His arms and said *Whoever receives one such child in my name receives me* (Mk 9:37), made a whip from ropes and chased moneychangers out of His Father's house while overturning their tables. His was a controlled, channeled strength; a fatherly strength, that our world today sorely lacks.

We could continue in this way, but I want to skip forward to the final beatitudes, because they are probably the hardest: *blessed are they who are persecuted for the sake of righteousness…blessed are you when they insult you and persecute you and utter every kind of evil against you falsely because of me. Rejoice and be glad*… What?! Is He joking? Well, no He's not. And there is one little phrase in there that I think unlocks the whole thing: *because of me*. Meaning, when we suffer for Christ, because of Christ, we are united with Christ in a real but mysterious way, just as He remained united to the Father when He was stripped of everything, and *persecuted for the sake of righteousness*.

To put it all together, we might say that the reward for all those who suffer on account of God—the all-righteous one—is *nothing less than God Himself*—is the Kingdom of Heaven Himself. The Beatitudes are not an exercise in stoicism. They are not a life of self-hatred, nor a flight from reality, nor the exaltation of the lazy, as anti-Christian philosophers have complained through the ages. Rather, they are a way of living in a beautiful yet fallen world that most unites us to God. So Jesus tells the disciples at the Last Supper just before He lives the Beatitudes most fully in His passion. *If anyone loves me, he will keep my word, and my Father will love him, and we will come to him and make our home with him* (Jn 14:23).

So back to our 2nd reading today from St. Paul's 1st Letter to the Corinthians, that *God chose the foolish of the world to shame the wise.* This is the 2nd key point: living the Beatitudes requires us to become foolish in the eyes of the world, because we're no longer living *for* this world. Jesus never promises that by following Him, you'll be perfectly happy *in this world.* Because no one—not even the richest, most famous, most powerful person on this earth is truly happy. We can never be completely happy in this fleeting world so marred by sin, exiled from our true homeland, which is with God. True blessedness, true happiness, is only found in the *Kingdom of Heaven.* That is the promise of Jesus in our Gospel today.

Finally, in case we are left with any lingering unease that the Beatitudes take all the joy out of this life. The great early 20th century English writer and Catholic convert GK Chesterton concludes his classic book *Orthodoxy*, which is a fiercely intelligent and witty defense of the Christian faith, by revealing what he calls "the gigantic secret of the Christian." He says that the Lord was unafraid to reveal all manner of human passions when He walked the face of the earth: His pathos, His tears, His anger, even His propensity to withdraw from men in order to pray. But *there was one thing,* Chesterton says, *that was too great for God to show us when He walked upon our earth; and I have sometimes fancied that it was His mirth*.