

4th Sunday in Ordinary Time (A)
(Zephaniah 2:3;3:12-13 / Matthew 5:1-12)
29.01.2017

Dear brothers and sisters,

Most of the time the first reading of the Sunday Eucharist is taken from the Old Testament. It is chosen in connection with the Gospel passage which is read in the course of the celebration. The first reading of the Sunday Eucharist is proposed to us then as one key, among others, to enter into the understanding of the gospel passage of the day.

Today's gospel passage, known as "the Beatitudes" is about Christian happiness. The word "happy" comes back nine times.

Perhaps we think that we don't need the gospel in order to learn how to be happy. We think that we shall be happy when we shall have a new car, a new home, a new job, a new partner, a degree, more money, more power, a comprehensive insurance policy to cover everything... We think that we shall be happy when we are recognized as a star on the stage and receive standing ovations... But we know by experience that all that is unable to give us the happiness we are made for, a happiness that endures. There is a longing, a restlessness, a yearning, a passionate desire for happiness and fulfilment within our hearts that nothing and nobody can satisfy. God alone can fulfil us. St Augustine once put it in these unforgettable words: "God, you made us for yourself, and our hearts are restless until they find their rest in you".

So perhaps it would be a worthwhile exercise for us to listen to the way to happiness proposed to us by the Scriptures. This morning the prophet Zephaniah gives us a beautiful description of the spirit of poverty and humility which provides us with a fundamental key to understanding the Beatitudes in the right perspective. Poverty of spirit and humility of heart lead us to true and lasting happiness. Zephaniah tells us that only "a humble and lowly people who seek refuge in the Lord will find shelter, will be able to graze and rest with no one to disturb them". In other words, only the poor and the lowly, that is to say only those who are defenceless and oppressed, are open to the Kingdom of God and its happiness. Poverty of spirit and humility of heart go hand in hand with the spiritual childhood which is required of us for entrance into the kingdom of God. True Christian happiness is a gift from God – one we have to ask for and wait for in prayer; it is a gift to be received with open and empty hands, with open and empty hearts.

"Happy the poor in spirit: theirs is the kingdom of heaven." With this first Beatitude, it is clear that it is not what we have or what we might come to possess that will make us happy. It is not what others think of us that will make us happy. Only a poor and humble heart which finds shelter in the Lord can be truly happy. It is an intimate relationship with the Lord which can bring us happiness. The Lord made a covenant with his people of which we are members. To be faithful to the Lord's covenant of love with us is what can make us truly happy. What makes us really happy is not what we have but who we are. The fact that we are God's beloved children is the source of the happiness for which we long.

"Happy the pure in heart: they shall see God". Only those who have a pure heart, a heart which is not encumbered with thoughts of possessions can be happy; only those who have a pure

heart and know that they are beloved children of God can be happy. Those who have a pure heart are people who are set free of all idols, free of themselves. It is this that permits them to see God. They can recognize the Lord present and at work in the world and in their daily lives.

“Happy those who mourn: they will be comforted”. Those who mourn are those who have lost someone; they are poor and needy. The presence of the Lord will comfort them and console them. The presence of the Lord will change their sorrow into joy.

“Happy the merciful: they shall have mercy shown them”. The merciful are those who have a poor and humble heart sensitive to the poverty and needs of others, a heart filled with compassion for the poor, a heart ready to give concrete help to those who ask for assistance. To people like these, God will be merciful!

The prophet Zephaniah gives us another key to understanding the Beatitudes. It is those who **seek** who will experience Christian happiness. The verb ‘to seek’ occurs four times in Zephaniah’s text: “those who seek the Lord, those who seek integrity, those who seek humility, and those who seek refuge in the name of the Lord. If we want to experience Christian happiness, true and lasting happiness, we have to seek the face of the Lord. The verb “to seek” evokes a process, a process which takes time, a process which lasts and in fact will never be finished. This process means that there is something we don’t have, something we desire, something we long for.

“Happy those who hunger and thirst for what is right: they shall be satisfied”. If we consent to long for what is right, if we seek after what God requires with perseverance, it shall be given to us, we shall experience real happiness.

In the same perspective: **“happy the peacemakers: they shall be called children of God”**: If we desire peace and work for peace, our hearts will become like God’s heart, and God will call us his children.

It can even happen that there is a big price to pay: **“Happy those who are persecuted in the cause of right; theirs is the kingdom of heaven”**. Persecution cannot suppress our happiness, because even in the midst of persecution, the Lord is with us, with his promise that He will comfort us and share his victory with us.

Yes, the happiness proposed to us by the gospel is not something superficial, a sort of skin-deep emotion, something which is given to us when all is going well. Christian happiness can be given to us even in the midst of persecutions. If our hearts are centred on the presence of God, the Lord will be with us in all our trials and will give us a share in his own victory. **“Happy are you when people abuse you and persecute you and speak all kinds of calumny against you on my account: rejoice and be glad, for your reward will be great in heaven”**.

A poor and humble heart of one who seeks the face of the Lord and strives to do his will will experience the happiness promised by Jesus in the Beatitudes. Let us pray that we will be blessed by having in us the attitudes found in Christ Jesus!