

4th Sunday in Ordinary Time

Zephaniah 2:3; 3:12-13

Zephaniah, one of the twelve minor prophets, prophesied before the exile in Babylon. His primary message is the “day of the Lord’s anger” is coming. Two and a half of the three chapters in the book are given over to a recital of the crimes and consequences that Israel must face up to. The last half of the last chapter consists of the promise of a remnant, which will be faithful to the Lord and be the beneficiaries of the covenant promises of Yahweh. Most of our passage is taken from this third chapter because we in the Church read this section as referring to ourselves.¹

3Seek the Lord, all you humble of the earth, This prophet gives us a description of the poor of Yahweh, the *anawim*. These are not necessarily the materially impoverished, but those who know that they have to depend on God. They are the humble who, knowing their own limits and weakness, turn to God for help. These are probably the people Matthew calls the “poor in spirit” in today’s gospel.⁷ **who have observed his law; seek justice,** Justice is the moral virtue that consists in the constant and firm will to give their due to God and neighbor. The just man is distinguished by habitual right thinking and the uprightness of his conduct toward his neighbor.³(CCC1807) **seek humility;** A great exercise in humility is given to us in Philippians 2:3-4, “Do nothing out of contentiousness or out of vainglory, but in humility let each one regard the others as his superiors, each one looking not to his own interests but to those of others.” **perhaps you may be sheltered on the day of the Lord’s anger.** Here Zephaniah launches an appeal to “seek Yahweh,” holding out not a guarantee nor even a promise but merely a “perhaps” regarding the possibility of escaping the impending doom.² If they don’t seek Him now, there is very little chance that they will seek Him on the day of His anger! This day was one on which Yahweh would manifest Himself in His power and glory in cosmic convulsions. The prophets applied it either to the judgment of Israel or the judgment of all mankind. Zephaniah describes it as a day of sacrifice when crimes will be punished and cries of disaster will be heard all over Jerusalem. It is a day of wrath, of trouble and distress, of desolation and waste, darkness and gloom, cloud and blackness, trumpet and battle cry.⁶ In essence, the prophet is foretelling the fate that befalls a society that neither prizes justice nor seeks humility nor observes God’s law.⁴

12But I will leave as a remnant in your midst a people humble This remnant is composed of those who have chosen to live rightly despite the sin of their neighbors.¹⁷ **and lowly, who shall take refuge in the name of the Lord:** To this prophet, the essence of sin is pride so consequently, the remnant will be humble and lowly. These verses represent the Old Testament’s best description of spiritual poverty; it was surpassed only by the teaching and the example of Jesus.²

13the remnant In sewing, the remnant is the small amount of fabric left over after you cut out the pieces for your project.¹³ **of Israel.** This refers to the people who remain true to their faith in spite of terrible hardship, poor leadership and bad examples all around them.⁴ **They shall do no wrong and speak no lies; nor shall there be found in their mouths a deceitful tongue; they shall pasture and couch their flocks with none to disturb them.** This remnant is not simply a limited number of survivors of some catastrophe, but they survive because its members are holy. This idea passes into the Christian age through St. Paul who identifies those Jews who accept Christ as the faithful remnant of the true Israel onto which the Gentiles are grafted in a new Israel. It is this remnant that

makes it possible for God to remain true to His covenantal promises and yet to deliver justice to the sinner. GOD'S JUSTICE AND MERCY ARE ONE AND THE SAME THING. The unrepentant experience it as the justice meted out on "the day of the Lord," while the righteous receive the blessings of His sheltering mercy in the covenant to which they have been faithful.¹ *they shall pasture and couch their flocks with none to disturb them.* This is a poetic description to depict peace. The virtuous, truthful, sincere remnant shall know peace and prosperity.¹⁴

1 Corinthians 1:26-31

*Few of the educated class in Corinth, few men of authority, few of the aristocracy, have been called to the faith. But God has called the lowly, the poor, the slaves, and most shocking of all paradoxes, the Gentiles. In this way God destroys the pretensions of all who account themselves as something.*¹⁴

26 Consider your own calling, brothers and sisters. Not many of you were wise by human standards, not many were powerful, not many were of noble birth. God calls us to be one of his children, not because of what we have done or what we may own or even how smart we may be. Faith is what is needed. God has made salvation available to all.⁵

27 Rather, God chose the foolish of the world to shame the wise, and God chose the weak of the world to shame the strong, The Church told men who, in the eyes of the world, were worthless, that, in the eyes of God, they were worth the death of God's only Son.⁸ These first Christians, uneducated, unimportant, even despised people, in the world's eyes, will be what he uses to spread his Church and convert the wise, the strong, and the "important": this disproportion between resources and results will make it quite clear that God is responsible for the increase.⁹ The task God has commended to Christians exceeds their abilities and can be carried out only with God's help.⁹ To the world the injuries and sufferings of the Savior are weak things, because the world does not understand that they have become the source of power through Christ who submitted to suffering in order to overcome death.¹⁸

28 and God chose the lowly and despised of the world, those who count for nothing, to reduce to nothing those who are something, The lowest in the world's view are the apple of God's eye. It's not wrong to be highborn, worldly-wise, temporally powerful, looked up to or privileged—unless it fools us into thinking we're worth more than other human beings or that we can rely on ourselves with no need of God. In fact, few of us occupy such lofty positions, and Paul says we should be glad of it.⁴

29 so that no human being might boast before God. Our importance comes from what God has done for us in Christ.⁷

30 It is due to him It is due to God the Father, for every spiritual blessing comes to us from the Father.¹¹ *that you are in Christ Jesus, who became for us wisdom from God,* Christ crucified and risen is the wisdom of God. Paul offers this as the answer to the Greek problem with religion for they were seeking wisdom.¹⁴ *as well as righteousness,* This means the Christian state of moral goodness and a right relationship with God.⁶ *sanctification,* We understand this to mean free from sin and set apart for a sacred purpose. *and redemption,* Redemption through the blood of Jesus is the remission of sin.⁶ In Christ, the Christian possesses all that the Greek and Jew yearned for: wisdom, justice, holiness, and redemption.¹⁸

31so that, as it is written, “Whoever boasts, should boast in the Lord.” This quotation is from Jeremiah 9:23-24. Jeremiah challenged the wise, mighty and rich of Israel to stop boasting about their worldly advantages and to start giving the glory to Yahweh. Paul quotes this passage to the Corinthians because they were boasting of their spiritual gifts without giving due credit to the Lord.¹¹

Matthew 5:1-12a

It is hard for us to appreciate how explosive this message was and how the words of Jesus shook the world of those who were listening to him. The Beatitudes, which dealt with the attitudes that a person must have for entering the Kingdom of heaven, opposed all the conventional values.¹⁴ They do not regard earthly happiness as a reward for good behavior and unhappiness and misfortune as a form of punishment. Spiritual good is on a much higher plane than material possessions. The healthy and the sick, the powerful and the weak, the rich and the poor are all called to the deep happiness that is experienced by those who live up to these teachings of Jesus.¹⁶

1When Jesus saw the crowds, he went up the mountain, Jesus is meant to be the new Moses proclaiming the new revelation on a new Mt. Sinai.¹⁴ **and after he had sat down,** This was a traditional posture for Jewish rabbis who were speaking with authority.¹² **his disciples came to him.** The multitude is present as well as the disciples as can be seen from 7:28.

2He began to teach them, saying: The first seven Beatitudes correspond to the seven gifts of the Holy Spirit. They offer a portrait of Jesus himself.⁴ Each Beatitude states that the possessor of this characteristic will be “blessed” by God. The Beatitudes are not about different kinds of people but different demands made on everyone who wants to be a disciple of Christ.¹⁶ A young child once told Fr. Ken Roberts that if an object had been blessed, that meant that it had been “touched by God”. Try reading these beatitudes and substituting “touched by God” everywhere “blessed” appears in order to get a little deeper meaning.¹⁸

3“Blessed are the poor in spirit, This is a foundation for all of the other beatitudes. Those who are “poor in spirit” exercise the fear of the Lord, a gift of reverence for God that awakens the soul to its weaknesses. These are the lowly of the Old Testament, who seek only the riches of heaven like those mentioned in the first reading. While this includes the powerless and the materially poor, it refers primarily to those who recognize their moral weakness.¹² The “poor in spirit” has more to do with a religious attitude of neediness and humility toward God than material poverty. The religious attitude of poverty is closely related to what is called “spiritual childhood.” A Christian sees himself as a little child in the presence of God, a child who owns nothing: everything he has comes from God and belongs to God.¹⁸ **for theirs is the kingdom of heaven.** To enter into the kingdom is the same as entering eternal life.⁶

4Blessed are they who mourn, Those who “mourn” exercise knowledge, the gift that imparts a correct estimation of created things and their relative value before God. They are troubled by the injustices of the world and grieve over their sins.¹² **for they will be comforted.**

5Blessed are the “meek,” The “meek” are not weak. They exercise piety, the gift of filial love for God that moves the soul to worship and PROTECTS against the hardening of one’s heart in the midst of trials. They maintain serenity and self-control through difficult circumstances.¹² **for they will inherit the land.** This is usually understood as our heavenly fatherland.¹⁶

6Blessed are they who hunger and thirst for righteousness, “Righteousness” would be translated as “holiness” today.¹⁶ These people exercise might or fortitude, the gift of firm resolution to pursue holiness despite obstacles.¹² Righteousness is the condition of good relations with God—achieved by submission to his will. These are the people whose central task in life is the fulfillment of God’s will as He is the source of all their happiness.¹⁵ A righteous person is one who sincerely strives to do the will of God, which is discovered in the commandments, in one’s duties of state in life, and through one’s life of prayer.¹⁸ **for they will be satisfied.**

7Blessed are the merciful The “merciful” exercise counsel, the gift that assists decision making and helps to guard against rashness; as an interior guide, it assists one to counsel others and to extend compassion to them.¹² The two works of mercy most emphasized in Matthew are almsgiving and forgiveness.¹⁴ However, being merciful also includes being understanding towards other people’s defects, overlooking them, helping them cope with them and loving them despite whatever defects they may have. Rejoicing and suffering with other people is part of this Beatitude as well.¹⁶ **for they will be shown mercy.** This will be at the last judgment.¹⁵

8Blessed are the clean of heart, Those blessed in this way exercise understanding, the gift of insight into the mysteries of faith. It is not mere intellectual understanding but the spiritual perceptions of the heart.¹² Cleanliness of heart is a gift of God, which expresses itself in a capacity to love, in having an upright and pure attitude to everything noble.¹⁸ **for they will see God.** They will see God face to face in heaven.¹² However, here on earth they will have admission to the presence of God.¹⁴

9Blessed are the peacemakers, The “peacemakers” exercise wisdom, the gift of contemplative reflection on—and love for—divine things. It enables one to assess the world by revealed truths and instills peace in the soul.¹² This can also mean, “those who reconcile quarrels.”¹⁴ **for they will be called children of God.** This is a title of Israel in the OT and those who reconcile quarrels are thought to be genuine Israelites.¹⁴

10Blessed are they who are persecuted for the sake of righteousness, This is persecution that is endured in order to maintain good relations with God by obedience to his will.¹⁴ Circumstances arise in a Christian’s life that call for heroism—where no compromise is admissible: either one stays true to Jesus Christ whatever the cost in terms of reputation, life or possessions, or one denies him.¹⁶ **for theirs is the kingdom of heaven.** This has the same reward as the first Beatitude.

11Blessed are you when they insult you and persecute you and utter every kind of evil against you falsely because of me. There are only eight beatitudes, this is an elaboration of the preceding one.¹⁸

^{12a}Rejoice and be glad, for your reward will be great in heaven.” This is a summary of the beatitudes and an invitation to put this teaching into practice.¹⁸ The Christian life, then, is no easy matter, but it is worthwhile, given the reward that Jesus promises.¹⁶

Some of the material for this commentary has been taken from: (1) The commentary notes of Sean Innerst and Tim Grey, (2) “Zephaniah, Nahum, Habakkuk, Lamentations and Obadiah” by George T. Montague, S.M., (3) “Catechism of the Catholic Church,” (4) “Workbook for lectors and gospel readers: 2002,” by Aelred R. Rosser, (5) “The Bread of Life Catholic Bible Study” by Deacon Ken and Marie Finn, (6) “Dictionary of the Bible” by John L. McKenzie, S.J., (7) “Workbook for lectors and gospel readers: 1999” by Lawrence E. Mick, (8) “The Letters To The Corinthians” by William Barclay, (9) “The Navarre Bible: Corinthians” (10) “Mystery Of The Kingdom” by Edward P. Sri, (11) “Ignatius Catholic Study Bible: The First and Second Letters of Saint Paul to the Corinthians” by Scott Hahn and Curtis Mitch, (12) “Ignatius Catholic Study Bible: The Gospel of Matthew” by Scott Hahn and Curtis Mitch, (13) “Workbook For Lectors and Gospel Readers” by Martin Connell, (14) “The Jerome Biblical Commentary,” (15) “The Collegeville Bible Commentary: Matthew” by Daniel J. Harrington, S.J., (16) “The Navarre Bible: St. Matthew”, (17) “Workbook for lectors and gospel readers” by James L. Weaver and (18) The St. Paul Center for Biblical Theology Online, founded by Dr. Scott Hahn.

In loving memory of Peg Schneller, who compiled these commentaries.