

## FOURTH SUNDAY IN ORDINARY TIME [A]

Zephaniah 2; 3; 3; 12 - 13

1 Corinthians 1: 26 - 31

Matthew 5: 1 - 12

Blessed are the strong, Blessed are the wealthy. Blessed are countries that possess nuclear weapons. Blessed are the conquering soldiers. Blessed are the suicide bombers.

Those are the world's Beatitudes for the 21<sup>st</sup>. Century, where might; military, economic or terrorist-inspired, is right.

Blessed are the poor in spirit. Blessed are the meek. Blessed are the merciful. Blessed are the peacemakers. Blessed are the pure in heart.

Those are the Beatitudes Jesus spoke 2000 years ago to a down-trodden people yearning for liberation from Roman rule.

Surely He should have spoken, in 1<sup>st</sup>. Century terms, those 21<sup>st</sup>. Century Beatitudes, to set people on fire to revolt against the Romans?

We have here the stark contrast between this world and, the Kingdom of God: the stark contrast between the Law, and the Spirit.

Living the Law of the 21<sup>st</sup>. Century Beatitudes leads to the very death of our souls.

Living in the Spirit of the 1<sup>st</sup>. Century Beatitudes leads to eternal life in Jesus Christ.

Right from the start there's always been a tension between the Law and the Spirit in Christianity; by that I mean a strict, unyielding adherence to a written law.

Such as Jewish Christians in the early Church wanting Gentile converts to take on the fullness of the Law of Moses, contained in the Pentateuch, the first five books of the Old Testament.

I can understand this preference for the law because grace is slippery, translucent, and hard to get our minds around.

Under law we think we always know where we are; we always know what the minimum is required of us to follow Jesus.

In truth we Christians may find it easier to follow a God who simply says, 'Obey my commandments,' rather than believing in salvation by grace, and grace alone.

The Church has its own authority and law; and, at times, the keeping of it has become a burden, and taken precedence over the Spirit working in the Church.

The former Master of the Dominican Order, Fr. Timothy Radcliffe, once said this about authority in the Church: "It's not the power to command. The authority of the Church has to rely on the truth of what we say - but truth born of lived experience." Briefing: May 2004

There's always been this tension between Law, and Spirit in the Church.

We can experience it now in the Catholic Church, and other Churches, where the Conservative wing asserts itself for a while; then the Liberal wing's in the ascendancy, and so on.

This see-sawing isn't good for any Church, because it deflects Christians from doing what we're called by Jesus to do.

To tell the world the Good News that He's come to set us free from our captivity to sin, and death.

This tendency can also be seen in people's attitudes to the Beatitudes.

Some say that we should just follow the Beatitudes because they sum up the Law of Christ, and not worry too much about the Ten Commandments.

Others, that the Ten Commandments are still binding; so the Beatitudes are a utopian ideal, and need not - indeed cannot- humanly speaking, be followed too closely.

Others make a real distinction between the God of the Old Testament giving the Ten Commandments to Moses in a great show of power, and the supposedly gentle Jesus meek, and mild of the Beatitudes.

So, you can see in those examples, there's a real tension in the Christian life between the Law, and the Spirit.

But let's remember that Jesus says this right after giving us the Beatitudes:

"Do not think I have come to abolish the law or the prophets; I have come not to abolish but to fulfil." Mt. 5: 17

Now what did Jesus mean by that? Did He mean that we have to follow the 616 laws found in the Pentateuch?

No, He didn't. He meant that we have to fulfil the principle behind them. To worship, and love our God and Father, which Jesus fulfilled perfectly. As Paul reminds us in the Letter to the Romans: "The one man, Jesus Christ." Rm. 5: 15 fulfilled the Law completely and perfectly. It's only through Him we can please God, and follow His Law of love, and service. His law of diakonia.

And, as Paul says again in Romans: "For just as by [Adam's] disobedience the many were made sinners, so by [Jesus'] obedience the many will be made righteous." Rm. 5: 19 God created us to know Him and love Him. He made us in His image, and likeness so that we could reflect His character; and the Old Testament Law was designed to bring that to life in us. But until Jesus came we always fell short because we prefer to live our own way without too much, if any, reference to God. So was the Law useless? Did God make a mistake with it? Was it God perversely setting goals for us knowing we wouldn't achieve them? No to all of those. And Paul in the Letter to the Galatians explains why "Before this faith in [Christ] came, [he says] we were held prisoners by the law, locked up until faith should be revealed. So the law was put in charge to lead us to Christ that we might be justified by faith. Now that faith has come, we are no longer under the supervision of the law." Gal. 3: 23 - 25

So, however much we try to please God under our own steam we're going to fail every time. We need Christ to breathe His Spirit into us so that we too can fulfil His Law. To do this we have to keep a balance between the Law, and the Spirit; but always remembering that: "Christ Jesus Himself [is] the chief cornerstone" Eph. 2: 20 of the building. He holds it together, and keeps it in balance. Just listen to this prayer of Paul's in the Letter to the Philippians: "And this is my prayer; that your love may abound more and more in knowledge and depth of insight, so that you may be able to discern what is best and may be pure and blameless until the day of Christ, filled with the fruit of righteousness that comes through Jesus Christ - to the glory and praise of God." Phil. 1: 9 - 11 He's praying for us to keep Jesus at the centre of all we do, of who we are, so that we can find our righteousness in Him. Paul prayed that the Philippians would, 'discern what is best.' That they would have the ability to discern what's right, and what's wrong, and what's vital, and what's trivial in the Christian life; to have moral discernment. He also prayed that they would be, 'pure and blameless until the day of Christ.' That they would live each moment as if they were about to meet Jesus; not as a condemning judge, but as a dear friend. And, flowing from all this is the, 'fruit of righteousness,' which enables us to assume the character and likeness of the Lord. And, there is no other way for us to gain this fruit of righteousness, than through Jesus Christ. Those fruits, which Paul lists in the Letter to the Galatians as: "Love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, and self-control." Gal. 5: 23 Those fruits, which are brought to birth by living the Beatitudes through the power of the Spirit of Jesus.