

“Sermon on the Plain”

In the first century world - descendants of the twelve tribes of Israel, made by God as a special people, were not all going in the same direction. We heard in one of our readings this morning about people who did not believe in the Resurrection on the last day – and those are called Sadducees. If you were a Sadducee, there was no hope for you – and I say usually, that is so sad – you see! Some were going in different directions, some were creating new rules to obey, they weren't anywhere in the Word of God but were more about tradition. Some were drawing new schemes for violent revolution – (zealots), while some others were showing support for Herod and his regime, there were some coming up with proposals for withdrawing into the desert and praying in private (Essene), and I am sure that there were others who had still more totally different ideas. Each group felt that God wanted to fulfill His promises through them. Now, into this first century Jewish world walks Jesus, and from the people He has met, He chose twelve. Even if He'd done that without a word, those present could see what He was doing. He was picking His team, who were to be the nucleus, the center, the starting point, of what would become Christianity, and for what God was now going to do. These simple men, some of whom we don't know all of their occupations, but we do know that some were fishermen, there was a tax collector, Simon the zealot, and a thief – these people were the core of God's renewed Israel.

Jesus shared with them clear instructions as to how His vision of His Father's work was going to move forward. He gave them four promises, and four warnings, in terms of Israel's Law of Moses: in the book called Deuteronomy, there were long lists of 'blessings' and a long list of curses. The blessings were for those who obeyed the law, and 'curses' for those who didn't. These were part of the promise, the covenant, the binding agreement made between God and Israel. Now, Jesus gives them His own version of the same thing, and Jesus' version is quite different, if not truly radical. It's an upside-down code, or maybe from Jesus' point of view - a right-way-up code instead of the upside-down ones people had been following.

As the Gospel today tells us – people from all over came to hear Jesus' teaching, with some coming to seek healing from diseases and some from healing of evil spirits. People wanted a piece of this man named Jesus. Can you imagine the crowds wanting to touch Him, to get a piece of Him, and as Luke tells us in verse 19, *“the people all tried to touch him, because power was coming from him and healing them all.”*

Several weeks ago, we read about Jesus' reading and preaching about Isaiah 61 from the sacred scroll. Jesus emphasized in the synagogue of Nazareth, as we read in Luke chapter 4, that He is fulfilling His promises, and this means good news for all the people who have been waiting for good news for a very, very long time. He said, in Luke 4:18-19, *“The Spirit of the Lord is on me, because he has anointed me to preach good news to the poor. He has sent me to proclaim freedom for the prisoners and recovery of sight for the blind, to release the oppressed, to*

proclaim the year of the Lord's favor." Jesus has come to help the poor, prisoners, heal the blind, and free those who are oppressed.

I got to thinking the other day. I didn't always wear glasses, but as I got older I started to need glasses for reading, and now it is for driving, and then for just about everything. I started thinking that if I lived during Jesus' time, and I did not have these, what would I be called? Blind. Many of us who wear glasses would be considered that, because we would not be able to see as much as we can see today. That scared me. He made a way – it is called the 'optician.' I am grateful.

In short, Jesus is seeking to help the poor, the hungry, those who weep, those who are hated. In today's Holy Gospel of Luke - Jesus is giving blessings to those people! This is known as the "Sermon on the Plain" and is not to be confused with the "Sermon on the Mount" – also known as the Beatitudes. This a bit shorter than the "Sermon on the Mount." Today's Holy Gospel opens with Jesus going *"down with them and stood on a level place."* Jesus' message here is about four 'beatitudes' (which begin with 'blessed are...' as opposed to the eight in the 'sermon on the Mount.' The key difference in this reading from Luke is that Jesus speaks about social conditions of injustice, as opposed to eight spiritual conditions in the Sermon on the Mount recorded in Matthew's Gospel. These are two separate events.

Listen to Jesus' words from the 'Sermon on the Plain:' *"Looking at his disciples, he said: 'Blessed are you who are poor, for yours is the kingdom of God. Blessed are you who hunger now, for you will be satisfied. Blessed are you who weep now, for you will laugh. Blessed are you when men hate you, when they exclude you and insult you and reject your name as evil, because of the Son of Man.'" (Luke 6:20-22)*

You might be thinking to yourself that that sounds a lot like another teaching that Jesus made. If you come to church every week, there are going to be times when you say, 'didn't Fr. John talk about that a couple of weeks ago?' There will be times when that happens because the message is the same – that God loves you and Jesus gave His life for you. There are only so many ways that you can unwrap a gift. You can cut the ribbon or you can pull it. It is still unwrapping the gift, and that is what we do every week here at St. Andrew's. We unwrap the wonderful gift that God gave us, His Son, Jesus. Think about it – there is nothing virtuous about being poor or hungry in itself, but when injustice is reigning, the world will have to be turned more towards the right way up for God's justice and kingdom to come into being. And that will incite opposition from people who like things just the way they are. Have you ever gone to a church and heard 'that is not the way we have always done things'? That does not happen here because you are always open to things that Gods wants to teach us. You just have to turn on the news today - one channel is for, and one channel is against. You have groups that are standing on the steps of the capitol doing one thing, and there are others standing someplace else doing another. There is always going to be opposing views. If you take and stand for the right, for the righteous, there will always be other people who will find another cause. Jesus' message of promise and warning, of blessing and curse, rang with echoes of the

Hebrew prophets of old, and He knew that the reaction from some people would be the same. Who is Jesus calling, and to what sort of a task?

- What are His promises and warnings for our world, for people who will hear His call and follow Him?

We must all answer for ourselves. As Christians we believe that what Jesus began with the call of the Twelve and gave the very sharp-edged teaching of blessings and curses – remain in force today – they have not changed. This is the shape of the kingdom of God: the kingdom which today still turns the world upside down. So, why are more not hearing Jesus' call? The answer is culture. The culture of today dictates to the world. The culture of today goes one way – the Word of God goes another. I don't have to do into detail. Each and every one of you know what I am talking about.

Both the 'Sermon on the Plain' and the 'Sermon on the Mount' are a special call, a challenge for us to "try to live" in the present - the way that will make sense in God's promised future. The question is, are we up to the challenge, will we be able to do it? That is always the question. When God gave the Ten Commandments to Moses – the question was - can the people do them? God knew that we can't and we won't. One Person that walked the face of the earth could keep the Law perfectly, and His Name is Jesus. God knows we are not going to be able to do it perfectly; God knows who we are – inside and out. He created us. If we make the effort and we try – then the future has already arrived in the present in the person and works of Jesus of Nazareth. It may seem somewhat upside down to us, but each one of us is called to believe, with great courage and great faith to be obedient.