

“Right Way Up or Upside Down?”

You have to remember that the world of the first century is very different than the world that we live in today. As a matter of fact in the world in which the Jewish people lived – the descendants of the twelve tribes of Israel, who were made by God as a special people, were trying different ways of being God's people. Some with new rules to obey, some with new schemes for violent revolution, some with support for Herod and his regime, some with proposals for withdrawing into the desert and praying in private, and no doubt there were others as well. God wanted to fulfill His promises through them. Now Jesus has come, and from the people He has met, He chose twelve. Even if He'd done that without a word, everyone 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, whom we don't know all of their occupations, but we do know that some were fishermen, there was a tax collector, a zealot, and a thief – they were the core of God's renewed Israel.

Jesus shared with them clear instructions as to how His vision of the 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 Him. 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.

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

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“Sermon on the Plain” not to be confused with the “Sermon on the Mount,” this a bit shorter than the “Sermon on the Mount.” We will do a comparison of the two. 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 is in this reading from Luke – Jesus speaks about social conditions of injustice, as opposed to eight spiritual conditions in the Sermon on the Mount recorded in Matthew’s Gospel. I will make it clearer for you.

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 every week, there are going to be times when you say, ‘didn’t Fr. John talk about that a couple of weeks ago?’ 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 – you know what I and saying? It is still unwrapping the gift, and that is what we do every week here at St. Andrew’s. We unwrap the gift that God gave us – and that is His Son. 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. I don’t have to point you to the political scene today, you just have to turn on the news. 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. But 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 – and they remain in force today. This is the shape of the kingdom of God: the kingdom which today still turns the world upside down, or is it the right way up, as much as ever it did? It makes you wonder why more are not hearing Jesus’ call. There is one word to answer that - culture. The culture of today goes one way – the Word of God goes another. I don’t have to do into detail. You know what I am talking about.

In the ‘Sermon on the Plain’ – after Jesus gives four blessings – then come His warnings, “*Rejoice in that day and leap for joy, because great is your reward in heaven. For that is how their fathers treated the prophets. “But woe to you who are rich, for you have already received your comfort. Woe to you who are well fed now, for you will go hungry. Woe to you*

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who laugh now, for you will mourn and weep. Woe to you when all men speak well of you, for that is how their fathers treated the false prophets.” (Luke 6:23-26)

I would like you to listen in contrast to the ‘Sermon on the Mount’ from Matthew chapter 5, in which Jesus gives a similar message – however in these blessings – Jesus is speaking of spiritual issues – not cultural, things that have to do with the person, and their condition, the social issues. Jesus is talking like this, using words like spirit, righteousness, mercy and heart. Jesus told the people, "*Blessed are the poor in spirit, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven. Blessed are those who mourn, for they will be comforted. Blessed are the meek, for they will inherit the earth. Blessed are those who hunger and thirst for righteousness, for they will be filled. Blessed are the merciful, for they will be shown mercy. Blessed are the pure in heart, for they will see God. Blessed are the peacemakers, for they will be called sons of God. Blessed are those who are persecuted because of righteousness, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven.*" (Matthew 5:3-10) Hunger and thirst for righteousness – not hunger and thirst for McDonalds, or Ruby Tuesday’s, or dare I say Harper’s on a Sunday afternoon.

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 - will we be able to do it? That is always the question. When God gave the Ten Commandments to Moses – the question was -can we do them? God know 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. 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, that it is in fact the right way for us to live – the right side up.