

The 4th Sunday of the Year.

When, at the ministers' ecumenical retreat, we were offered the possibility of providing the "Read the Bible in a Year" bibles, I hesitated because I did not think many people would take them. I ordered 20 and, much to my surprise, they all went very quickly. I was asked to get some more and ordered 100 copies which have all gone. So at least 120 of our parish community are reading a part of the bible each day for the next year.

Why was I surprised that all of the books were taken? I certainly should not have been. In each of us there is a great thirst for the wisdom and truth of the word of God which we know leads us to life and effectiveness as disciples of Jesus and members of the Church. In fact the message of the scriptures, if we are open to it, will illuminate, purify and fulfil all the longings and desires of our hearts and minds because it is a life giving message.

Today, as Jesus begins his 'Sermon on the Mount, the Sacred Scripture we are offered, brings into sharp focus the essence of the message and the ways in which the Gospel can transform us for good.

St. Paul offers us a very clear way into the message of life which Christ is constantly offering us. He speaks of the fact that we are all called by God to follow Jesus and, just in case we are tempted to think that we might deserve such a call, he asks us "how many of you were wise in the ordinary sense of the word, how many were influential people or came from noble families? No, it was to shame the wise that God chose what is foolish by human reckoning; those the world thinks are common and contemptible are the ones that God has chosen....The human race has nothing to boast about to God, but you, God has made members of Christ Jesus."

Our starting point is that we are given life and gifts so that we might use them to receive in trust and faith the wisdom, the virtue, the holiness and the freedom that is in Christ. He is the end of our search. And so Zephaniah speaks of that fundamental and vital attitude which he describes as a 'humble and lowly people.' Not a proud, secure approach to living but the one that we see in Mary. A readiness to open her life, her gifts, her whole person to the gift of the Holy Spirit in the confidence that she would be used in God's service, a service which would bring her the most perfect happiness and fulfilment. As she says in the Magnificat "He looks on me in my nothingness and henceforth all generations will call me blessed." Or as Job said "Naked I came from my mother's womb, naked I shall return.

Jesus says at the end of his list of beatitudes "Happy are you when people abuse you and persecute you." Strange and uncomfortable words but nevertheless true. We are already persecuted, or at best only just tolerated because the message that we say brings life contradicts the message and understanding on which our world and society is being built. The message is that excellence, control, power, position, possessions and outstanding achievement will bring life and success. The message of the word of God is that it will not.

Notice how Jesus begins the beatitudes: "How happy are the poor in Spirit." The greatest of rewards and success, nothing less than the Kingdom of Heaven, is for those who live poverty in their lives. Something else that surprises me is how often this Gospel of the Beatitudes is chosen for weddings and funerals. It is very popular and yet it is very challenging and uncomfortable. The way to a true human response is the way of poverty; being poor enough to be open and dependent on the goodness of God and poor enough not to be blinded by riches to the needs of the poor and to realise that the wealth of one person is the poverty of another.

As if the Kingdom of heaven was not enough Jesus speaks of inheriting the earth, something that is offered to the gentle; to the meek. To live the Gospel we are to be those who are sensitive and attentive to God and to others so that we might live his love and be filled with respect for all those who share our lives.

Jesus speaks of suffering; of mourning, of unsatisfied desire for food and drink. These experiences are the way to the comfort and satisfaction that only God can give. They are the indicators that should open us in trust to the gifts that God is offering.

Jesus speaks of mercy and that great gift that we are constantly receiving from God. How often are we made conscious of our own failings, the damage we do to ourselves to one another, to creation and God is always ready to forgive and heal. Those who have received mercy must live so that this invisible gift is made recognisable in the love and compassion we show to those around us. Somehow the expectation is that the mercy we receive from God will flow through us into the lives of others.

Then there is that vital gift which Jesus describes as 'purity of heart'. This is about living life completely in accord with God's purpose for us and responding to him in trust and living at peace with one another. It is about seeing God in the detail of daily life and responding in complete cooperation with the Holy Spirit who is present in our lives.

Jesus speaks of being peacemakers because peace is the gift he brings to us and peace is the gift which we must allow to fill ourselves and those with whom we share our lives. The peace he means is the wholeness and harmony for which we search in our own hearts and minds; the reconciliation and partnership that we want in our relationships and the respect and openness to the poor and those who are different from us and yet created by God in his image and likeness.