

## **Fourth Sunday in Ordinary Time A/2017**

The readings of this Sunday talk about human happiness. They show that true happiness is that which comes out of the observance of God's Law. They invite us to seek the Lord and to find our delight in him.

The first reading describes the words of the prophet Zephaniah to the people of Israel. It highlights his exhortation to them so that they seek the Lord by observing his Law and by practicing virtues. It also shows that by doing so they avoid God's wrath and receive their reward from him.

What is behind this text is the idea that it is beneficial for our salvation to put God above everything we do in this world. There is also the idea that those who observe the Law and conduct themselves irreproachably will receive from the Lord many blessings.

This text allows us to understand the stakes of today's Gospel as Jesus talks about the beatitudes. First of all, the Gospel says that when Jesus saw the crowd, he went up the mountain and started teaching them.

Then it highlights the diverse and different ways that lead to happiness that Jesus showed them. The Gospel ends with Jesus statement to the crowd, namely that they are blessed and are to rejoice when bad things are said of them because of him.

What do we learn from this Gospel? Today I want to talk about the pursuit of happiness. This is a very curious title because it reminds us of a movie in which a man poor and miserable, against all odds, but animated with determination, audacity, courage and hope, ends up by becoming a stockbroker on Wall Street.

His story is the story of many among us who have pursued a dream with stubbornness and tenacity until it became a reality. His story is the story of our culture embedded in success and achievements. We see it all over again and again; it is taught in our schools and in our homes; it is said repeatedly every day as a slogan: "You can become anything you want; it is just a question to work hard and to believe in your dreams".

That is why our society celebrates successful people and heroic persons for what they have achieved. We, in turn, following the trend of our culture, want also to become heroes and successful in what we undertake.

In truth, there is nothing wrong with all that. In other words, it is legitimate to dream big because without dreams our life becomes stuck and our aspirations without a future. Behind all dreams and aspirations, there is always a deep search for happiness. That is why when our dreams and aspirations are achieved, it brings us joy and makes us happy.

However, life experience has taught us that human joy, which is the expression of our happiness, depends on chance, luck and circumstances of time, space and environment. As the circumstances change, the conditions of life also are not always stable. A change in fortune or a collapse in health, the failure of a plan or the disappointment of an ambition, even a change in the weather can take away the smallest joy we can have.

So, what makes us joyful and happy today may fail tomorrow when circumstances and chances change. In the end, it comes to the truth that human happiness is fragile. I believe that it is one of the reasons why in today's Gospel, instead of talking about happiness, Jesus speaks of blessedness. It is for that reason also I think it would be better to talk about "Seeking for blessedness" beyond the pursuit of happiness.

By making a distinction between happiness and blessedness, Jesus wants to tell us that if we put our joy in God, we build on solid ground while all other ways are fragile. That is what he tries to bring in the sermon on the mountain we call "Beatitudes".

The beatitudes, in fact, describe a joy that has its secret within itself because its source is in God. Because its source is in God, such a joy is untouchable and independent of human circumstances. Human happiness, indeed, is something which depends on the chances and the changes in life. It is something life may give, but is also something life may take away. The beatitudes, on the contrary, speak of a joy that nobody can take away, because God himself is its author. It is a joy that comes even in pain and suffering, a joy which sorrow and grief cannot destroy, a joy which shines through tears and nothing in this life can take away.

Of course, this joy will find its fullness in the presence of God at the end of time, but nonetheless, it is a reality we can enjoy right now by our acceptance of Jesus. That is why anytime we strive for spiritual poverty, we are building the kingdom of heaven where God will enrich us who put our material and worldly success at the feet of Jesus.

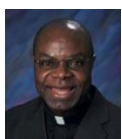
Anytime we mourn for God's sake, we are sure that we will be comforted, because that day God will wipe away every tear from our face. Anytime we work hard in order to change our character in becoming meek, gentle and kind, we are preparing our heritage, because by striving so we will see God.

Anytime, we work for justice and peace between families, peoples and nations, we are building God's kingdom, because that day we will be recognized as God's children. Anytime we forgive the wrong done to us and we allow others to reconcile with us and with one another, we prepare God's blessing on us, because that day God will in turn be merciful toward us.

Anytime we accept to be insulted, persecuted and slandered because of Jesus, we have to rejoice and be glad, because that day we will be rewarded for our fidelity. This way of being happy that Jesus proposes seems a strange way to live. And yet, some people have tried it and it worked. Think of Gandhi, Martin Luther King, Mandela, etc.

Let us ask Jesus to help us embrace the way of the beatitudes so that we come one day to the Kingdom of his Father. Let us ask him to help us to be humble by grounding everything we do in this world on his Father and not on ourselves. May God bless you all!

**Zephaniah 2: 3; 3: 12-13; 1 Corinthians 1: 26-31; Matthew 5: 1-12a**



Homily Date: January 29, 2017  
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Contact: [www.mbala.org](http://www.mbala.org)

Document Name: 20170129homil