

The Beatitudes and the Cross

Fourth Sunday in Ordinary Time - Mt 5:1-12a

Ave Maria Catholic Church, January 29, 2023 - Fr. David M Vidal

Every person has the desire to be happy. Every one of us wants fulfillment, a sense of rest, true satisfaction, and lasting joy. We were created to live a happy life, and we are constantly looking for it; we are always working towards it and always longing for it.

Everyone wants to be happy, but not everyone agrees on what happiness is.

For some, happiness has a monetary value. It is something that you can buy or sell. It is something that you can keep in the bank or accumulate in the stock market. Then, money will bring you a pleasant life: you can eat and drink well and enjoy the world. That is one answer to the search for happiness, but is it a definitive answer? If it is, eat, drink, and be merry, for tomorrow, you die. That is a shortsighted answer.

For others, happiness is found in honors. Is it wrong to be recognized for your good actions? Is it wrong to be honored for worthy acts? Of course not! However, if recognition from people is the pinnacle of all your aspirations, your life will be miserable because the world does not necessarily recognize people for what is truly good. And if, eventually, it does, do not hold your breath. Today you will be honored, and tomorrow you will be humiliated. In this world, you will not find consistency.

Some others find happiness in power. If you are powerful, you dominate people and circumstances. Nobody tells you what to do; on the contrary, you tell others what they must do, and they must obey. You set the rules, and they must be respected. History tells us how far the power of this world can go. Even the most dreadful tyrants in history could not overcome the limits of time. They died, and their power was gone.

Where is happiness, then? If happiness is not in worldly pleasures, honors, and power, where do we find happiness? To answer this question, we must climb a mountain. This a most rewarding experience. It is true; it requires some effort. One step after the other, you go through the rocky path. You must overcome obstacles and endure the heat and eventually some storms, but if you arrive at the top of the mountain, what a rewarding experience! The whole world can be seen in perspective. The things that we thought were huge and important become small and insignificant. You see things from a higher point of view, from a beautiful point of view!

The prophet Isaiah, who describes the Messiah as if he were an evangelist, invites us: *“Come, let us go up to the mountain of the Lord, to the house of the God of Jacob; that he may teach us his ways and that we may walk in his paths,”* (Is 2: 3).

The Mountain of the Lord

Today, we are invited to climb the Mountain of the Lord. This is the Mount of the Beatitudes. It is a hill, about 500 feet high, on the western shore of Lake Tiberias, approximately eight miles from Tiberias and two miles from Capharnaum. There is Jesus. Now, Jesus doesn't deliver the sermon at the top of the hill. He was there, but he came down to a level place on the southwest slope of the mountain to speak to us.

Jesus comes down from the heights, he meets us midway, and He comes to tell us how we can arrive at the very top. How true are the words of the prophet Isaiah: "*Come, let us go up to the mountain of the Lord, to the house of the God of Jacob; that he may teach us his ways and that we may walk in his paths.*" (Is 2:3)

The Divine Teacher

If you want to climb a mountain unknown to you, you want to have the best guide. Someone who truly knows how to arrive at the top. Someone who traveled the path and arrived at the peak.

Jesus is our guide. He is the Divine Master who teaches us his way to the summit from where He comes. This is how the prophet Isaiah describes Him: "*Wonder-Counselor, Mighty-God, Prince-of-Peace,*" (Isaiah 9:5).

Christ is a teacher full of wisdom. Human teachers know the faces of their hearers, but Jesus knows their hearts. He also knew how to speak a word in due season, when to humble, and when to comfort. He knew perfectly what to say, in the right way, at the proper time.

Christ is also a powerful teacher. "*He spoke with authority,*" (Matthew 7: 29). This is why the people said: "*No man spoke like this man,*" (John 7: 46). And His actions confirmed his words.

The Divine Teacher Speaks to Us

And what does He tell us? "*Blessed are the poor in spirit . . . Blessed are they who mourn . . . Blessed are the meek . . . Blessed are they who hunger and thirst for righteousness . . . Blessed are the merciful . . . Blessed are the clean of heart . . . Blessed are the peacemakers . . . Blessed are they who are persecuted for the sake of righteousness . . . Blessed are you when they insult you and persecute you and utter every kind of evil against you falsely because of me . . . Rejoice and be glad, for your reward will be great in heaven.*" (Mt 5: 3-12a).

His words were certainly unheard of! We were always told that we must seek and be satisfied with what this world offers us, and Jesus is saying that happiness goes above and beyond what the world gives us. Who can endure these words?

The Venerable Fulton Sheen makes this great observation: “*The Sermon on the Mount is so much in disagreement with all that our world holds dear that the world will crucify anyone who tries to live up to its values. Because Christ preached them, He had to die. Calvary was the price He paid for the Sermon on the Mount,*” (*Go to Heaven: A Spiritual Road Map to Eternity*).

Why does Jesus bring this message? Jesus’ words are as clear as His life. We will never reach true happiness without sacrifice. That was His message, and that was His life. If there were another path, he would have told us. However, he taught us that we must be ready to sacrifice ourselves if we want to enjoy the view at the top of the mountain.

Jesus, our happiness! How many songs and hymns have been composed with this theme? However, how many people truly understand what the lyrics mean?

Again, the Venerable Fulton Sheen explains: “*The Beatitudes are not illusions; they are hard facts and realities inseparable from the Cross of Calvary. What He taught was self-crucifixion: to love those who hate us; to pluck out eyes and cut off arms in order to prevent sinning; to be clean on the inside when the passions clamor for satisfaction on the outside; to forgive those who would put us to death; to overcome evil with good; to bless those who curse us; to stop asking for freedom until we have justice, truth and love of God in our hearts as the condition of freedom; to live in the world and still keep oneself uncontaminated from it; to deny ourselves sometimes legitimate pleasures in order the better to crucify our selfishness- all this is to sentence the old man in us to death,*” (*Go to Heaven: A Spiritual Road Map to Eternity*).

Some people will say: “This is foolishness!” But Jesus tells us: “This is wisdom!” The “foolishness” of the cross is the path to wisdom and happiness. This foolishness begins when there is no longer counting, calculating, or measuring. *Do you only love the one who loves you? Do you only give something to the one who can return it to you? Do you only do favors to those who thank you? How great is all that?* (Mt 5:47). Then, we learn that the foolishness of the cross consists in living the beatitudes. These are the principles that lead us above and beyond. They lead us to the very summit of the mountain.

Let us listen to the prophet Isaiah: *Let us go up to the mountain of the Lord, to the house of the God of Jacob; that he may teach us his ways and that we may walk in his paths.*
Amen