

**Fourth Sunday in Ordinary Time – Year A
(Jan. 30, 2005)**

How to Be Happy

When Jesus saw the crowds, Matthew tells us, he went up the mountain. He went up the mountain – like Moses going up the mountain to receive the law from God and present it to the people. Jesus also was going to present the law, the new law, his law, his law that would go beyond the old law of Moses and propose a way of life that he says is also the way to happiness, a life of beatitude, of blessedness. Then he goes on to propose things that seem to be the exact opposite: poverty of spirit, meekness, suffering, bearing the taunts of enemies. This is certainly not what we would normally think of as the way to happiness.

It's interesting to compare Matthew's version of the beatitudes with Luke's. In Luke's Gospel Jesus spends the night in prayer as he so often does in Luke's Gospel. Then he comes down from the mountain and in the plain on the same level with the people he addresses, he looks at them and he says, "Blessed are you poor. Yours is the kingdom of heaven." Matthew adds the qualification, poor in spirit, not just economically poor. Luke's version might be closer to what Jesus actually said, given his own personal option for the poor, but apparently Matthew wanted to universalize it so that in some way it could apply not just to the economically poor but to everyone.

Well, then, what does it mean, to be poor in spirit? Basically it means to realize that ultimately I am not self-sufficient, that, in the final analysis I depend completely and totally on God. The person who is down and out, who is really poor, knows that he or she is not self-sufficient, even for basic everyday necessities. But the comfortable, and even more so the wealthy, are not confronted on a daily basis by their own radical inadequacy before God, so it is harder for them to realize their ultimate dependency. But they can do it with God's help. And to the extent that they manage to do just that, they are poor in spirit.

There seems to be a lot of unhappiness in the world we live in. Our news media report far more bad news than good news. I don't know about

you, but I find it difficult to read the papers, watch television, or listen to the radio and be constantly reminded of all the bad things that are happening in our world: the unending war in Iraq, people being killed and wounded every day, homes destroyed, families decimated, the impossibility of bringing Israelites and Palestinians together even to talk about peace. It can all be a bit discouraging.

That's why it's good for us to come here on Sunday to hear Jesus tell us some good news. There must have been plenty of bad news in Palestine in his time, too. After all, the country was occupied by Roman conquerors. There was plenty of real poverty. A wicked king was on the throne. John the Baptist was in prison. Things did not look too good.

But what I hear Jesus saying is something like this: You know, it wouldn't be too hard to find some good news to shout about. After all, look around you. Look at the good things that are happening. There is happiness. There is hope. The Kingdom of heaven is establishing itself. Look at the gentle people, the comforting people, the outgoing people, those who do not hold on to what they have, but use it to help others. Think of all the help given to our brothers and sisters who are sick and helpless. Look at the peacemakers, the merciful ones, those who seek justice, those who struggle for wholeness. Because of what they do, happiness is everywhere.

There was a wonderful sister who worked with us at Manresa-on-Severn, the Jesuit retreat house near Annapolis. She used to call these the Be-Attitudes. She would fracture English grammar to make a point. She liked to say, "If these be your attitudes, then you are happy; you are happy right now, and the kingdom of heaven is yours already. Not at some future time, but now, today."

So, listen to Jesus. Pray about what he says. Let these be your attitudes and be happy.