

Homily for 4th Sunday in Ordinary Time, Year A

By Fr. Jerome Ituah, OCD

Readings: Zeph 2:3, 3:12-13; Ps 145(146); 1 Cor 1:26-31; Matt 5:1-12a

Theme: True Happiness!

Every human being desires to be happy. Yet, people seek happiness in different ways and things, sometimes in the wrong ways and wrong things. Moreover, happiness derived from material things is always transient. We lose joy when those things fail or fade because it depends on them.

Our first reading is from Zephaniah, a prophet who prophesied during the late 7th century BC and was a contemporary of Jeremiah. His prophecies focus on the Day of the Lord, exposing the iniquities of Judah, namely idolatry and moral corruption. The people were seeking fulfilment and happiness in serving other gods. Still, they were heading to doom on the coming day of judgement. In our reading today, Zephaniah calls the people to repentance and preaches a message of hope. He appeals to the people to seek the Lord and humble themselves. They are to seek righteousness and humility to avoid the anger that will come on the day of the Lord, the day of judgment. They must not focus on transient joy in the things of the world and end up in an eternal separation of unhappiness from God. There are blessings associated with the day of the Lord. Those who are humble and lowly will find refuge in the Lord. The poor and lowly in the context refer to the remnants left behind in the land after the exile by the Babylonians. Knowing the grace and blessings of God for saving them from the exiles and left in the land of Israel, they will be faithful to God. They will not practice injustice, speak any lies, or be deceitful. Their humility and poverty reflect their inner attitude towards God, not just their social status. Hence, the responsorial psalm says: How happy are the poor in spirit; theirs is the kingdom of heaven. Because they trust in the Lord, they enjoy God's protection and care. Therefore, they will reign with God forever and be happy in his kingdom even though they are judged poor here on earth.

The Beatitudes in the gospel have their foundation in this dependence and total trust in God. The first word in the Beatitude is *makarioi*, Blessed. The term beatitude, from the Latin "beatus", translates the Greek term "makarios", which means "blessed", "fortunate", or "divinely favoured." Similar blessings are found in the Hebrew Bible, especially in the psalms, using the word "ashrei" (see Ps 1:1; 2:12; 32:1.2 etc.), a term which connotes being in a good state of mind. Those favoured and fortunate before God are not necessarily those the world considers blessed and happy. They are the unfortunate ones in the eyes of the world.

But the context tells us that Jesus is not referring to our human understanding of happiness. It refers to a form of transcendent happiness or religious joy. The kind of joy the disciples felt when they were punished for preaching the gospel (cf. Acts). Someone cannot rejoice while suffering, but the Makarios here is happiness for the sake of the kingdom of heaven. Therefore, the poor in spirit, those who offer up their will to God and depend on God's providence, are blessed because they know that their reward is the kingdom of heaven. Those who mourn presently for their sins, the gentle and humble, those who hunger and thirst for justice and righteousness, the merciful, pure in heart, the peacemakers are blessed. Those who are blessed are not blessed according to the world's standards. The world recognizes the rich, the proud, and those who flaunt their strength and practice injustice. Those who are powerful and oppress others are those the world speaks about. But the blessed who will inherit the kingdom of God are the poor, the lowly, humble, those who are persecuted for doing the right thing, and those who follow God with a sincere heart.

St. Paul tells the Corinthians to boast only in the Lord. God brought us into the world. Some of us are fortunate to be born into influential families, and others rise to prominence through their own efforts. Nevertheless, God is behind all our successes, and we can boast of nothing except what God does in us. We must therefore be humble, submit and trust entirely in God because our happiness, even in the material things of the earth, comes from him.