

**Rev. Kevin V. Madigan**  
**Church of St. Thomas More, NYC**  
**January 29, 2023**  
**4<sup>th</sup> Sunday of Year A      Matthew 5:1-12**

A few weeks ago, the feature article in the NY Times magazine section was about a doctor in Boston, Jim O'Connell, whose patients were the city's homeless population, people whom he preferred to call "rough sleepers," a British term from the 19th century. After a distinguished academic career at Notre Dame, Cambridge and Harvard, he was set to join the staff of Sloan Kettering Hospital. Upon finishing his residency at Mass General, he was asked to take a brief detour in a new program aimed at helping the city's homeless. He decided he would take up the challenge because he wanted to "give back." What was supposed to be a one-year stint became instead a commitment lasting almost four decades. You can read the article by just Googling "NY Times Boston homeless." There is no pay wall. Certainly Dr. Jim O'Connell is a unique individual and most of us are not going to do what he did. Still, I mention his story because it shows how one individual lived out his faith, a faith shaped by Jesus' Sermon on the Mount, which begins with today's Gospel about the Beatitudes.

The Gospel challenges each of us to incorporate in some way the message of the Gospel. The Beatitudes are given to us as a challenge and as an antidote—a challenge to pursue a way of life that will always be at odds with what passes for "conventional" wisdom, and as an antidote to so much of the cynicism, the expediency, the pretense, the avarice and the violence all around us. The "conventional" wisdom of our day tells us that our life's goal should always be to "Look out for #1; push your way to the top; and nice guys finish last." The beatitudes of our day might run something like this. Blessed are the avaricious. Blessed are those whose life is one big party. Blessed are the arrogant, who take no guff from anybody. Blessed are those who are fed up with talk about social justice. Blessed are the tough (and cursed be all "bleeding hearts"). Blessed are the devious. Blessed are the contentious. Blessed are they who know precisely who the "bad guys" are and are not hesitant to blow them away verbally, if not literally.

There is a real disconnect between what society tells us will bring us happiness, and what Jesus tells us will bring us joy. Happiness is transitory, is fleeting; it comes and goes. It depends on what might be going on in our lives at the moment. As much as we might try, we cannot capture happiness; we can't bottle it up; it will always elude our grasp. Blessedness, however, is something more stable and permanent than happening to feel good. It is an attitude, a disposition of the mind and heart, which

enables one to weather the storms of life with equanimity and peace, to enjoy the blessings that come one's way, but not to be undone when they slip away. It enables one to embrace life on a level deeper than the superficial, a level where purpose and meaning are provided as the guideposts for a life well-lived.

Jesus says. "Blessed are they who..," but I suggest that the way to hear them as addressed to each of us is to understand them as, "Would I not be blessed, would I not be fortunate indeed, would I not be better off if..., if I incorporated these sayings into my everyday life? What if?" What if I could be "poor in spirit," if I could be convinced that the accumulation of material things mattered less than cultivating the simple joy of living? Would I be better off if I were able "to mourn," if I did not live insulated and remote within a bubble of my own making, cold and unfeeling, but instead was able to be upset with the injustices, the suffering, the violence that so many in our city, our nation, our planet have to endure every day? And if I were "meek"—not that I should be a doormat—but that I did not have to be a slave to the demands of my ego, compelling and manipulating people always to dance to my tune, would I not be better off? And what if I were "merciful," that quality which Shakespeare describes as "the milk of human kindness," just to be able to give another person a break when they needed it, not really worrying of they deserved it or not. Would I not be better off, if I could live like that? Would I not be fortunate indeed if I were "clean of heart," if I possessed a moral compass so clearly set on what is noble and decent and good, that I need not compromise or equivocate in trying to do the right thing? And would I not be blessed if I were a "peacemaker," if I saw the differences between people, differences of income or social status or race or gender or sexual orientation, not as barriers but as bridges to be crossed, and then did something to cross them? And finally, what kind of person would I become, if I were so convinced that this path that Jesus marks out for me is so superior to what society offers that I am willing to accept any rejection, any mockery, any attack from that society?

The Sermon on the Mount, these Beatitudes, may seem too idealistic, too utopian, that only someone like Jesus could live this way. Nonetheless, they are given to us not as an obligation, but as an opportunity, an invitation to live a life that is both fulfilled and fulfilling. Mahatma Ghandi, who read the Sermon on the Mount twice a day for the last forty years of his life, once said, "Be the change you want to see in the world." That is certainly a noble and inspiring thought. Jesus gives us something more, a firmer foundation on which to base our hope. When Jesus speaks of the Kingdom of God, of the Reign of God, He is saying that the future that is in God's hands, the future wherein love and justice and peace will triumph, that future is already breaking into the present in the lives of His disciples who are open to the transforming power of the

Holy Spirit. As we live out the Beatitudes we are drawn by the power of that future, rather than pulled down by the cynicism and lethargy of the present. Because we are empowered by faith to live in the future, in God's future, we cannot help but to be out of step with what society offers us as its very best. But then, too, we are blessed with the peace that the world cannot give.