

HOMILY SUNDAY 4-A
“Humble Faith of a Beatitude People”
(Zephaniah 2:3, 12-13; Ps 146; 1 Cor 1:26-31; Mt 5:1-12)

Could you see yourself learning wisdom from a sparrow?

Be humble, and enter the Kingdom of God.

Once I tried to get a sparrow out of the church in Beauval by waiting until dusk, opening the porch door and turning on the light, hoping it would fly out on its own. When it didn't I tried to encourage it with a broom. It flew everywhere except out through the open door. It especially tried to get out all the windows that had been secured and did not open. Finally it landed on an overhead supporting rod, exhausted, puffing and unable to move. I was able to stand on a pew, put my finger beneath it and it crawled backwards onto my finger. I then calmly walked out the door of the church with the little bird on my finger, when suddenly it regained its breath and flew away.

It struck me forcibly how like that sparrow we are. Many of us are in a spiritual, invisible cage of our own making. The bottom is most probably a lack of love; the front, false pride; the back, resentment; the sides, loneliness and jealousy. The top is our addiction, the way we are trying to save ourselves. The more we try that approach, however, the more we harm ourselves. All we have to do is to be like that sparrow – become tired of trying to futile save ourselves, hit bottom, surrender, and we will find a small door at the bottom that was open all the time – the door of humility.

False pride is the opposite of humility. False pride is the main obstacle that holds us back from healing, from experiencing the power of God. Once I had an opportunity to experience a facilitated growth experience with a renewal group. We were shown a gym with ropes criss-crossing it at a height of about six feet. We were told that we would be blindfolded and given ten minutes to find a key, without being allowed to talk to anyone. If someone found the key or got into any trouble, they were to raise their arm as a sign to the facilitator.

I started off following one rope, determined to be the first to find the key. After bumping into a couple other participants going in the opposite direction, I decided it could not be a key taped to the rope. It must be a trick, or a puzzle – perhaps a key word. Given my experience with the Twelve Step program, I rather proudly put up my hand numerous times to offer my solutions – words such as “humility”, “cooperation”, “teamwork” and “helping each other.” None of my answers were right and suddenly the time was up. I was disappointed and somewhat frustrated.

As we debriefed the experience, we discovered that only one person had succeeded to find the key. He had run into a wall, and being rather emotional, started to cry. When asked if he was okay by a facilitator, he replied that he needed help. That was the key – asking for help. He alone of the group had actually asked for help. When I realized this, I felt ashamed and even afraid – here I was, teaching others how to go on healing journeys, yet I was unable to ask for help for myself. I was too proud. That awareness was a wake up call for me, a deep lesson in my own need to grow in humility, a humility that is the key to the Kingdom of God.

It should not be surprising, then, to find the virtue of humility at the core of the Beatitudes, the

Magna Carta of Jesus' teachings. Humility is the key to entering the Kingdom of God. One consistent thing about Jesus, from his birth in a manger to his death on a cross, is humility. St. John of the Cross said that he found all the other virtues in the Philosophers, but he did not find humility until he came to the Gospel. It is only the humble who enter the Kingdom of God.

The three different spiritualities that have characterized my ministry over the years all teach that same lesson of humility. For the First Nations peoples, the sweat lodge doorway necessitates entrance upon one's knees. One does not enter a sweat lodge in a standing posture. Participation in a sweat lodge is an implicit humble prayer for healing, and a symbol for one's inter-relationship with all of creation.

The spirituality of the 12 Step program of Alcoholics Anonymous also begins on the note of humility. Step One is an admission of need, of powerlessness: "Admitted that I was powerless over alcohol, and that my life was unmanageable." Step 4 asks for a humble honest examination of conscience. Step 5 calls for the humility to admit the exact nature of one's wrongs to God, to one's self, and to another human being. Truly, the gospel value of humility permeates the Steps.

Our Catholic Christian faith, of course, is also strong on promoting the virtue of humility. One cannot celebrate reconciliation, the confession of one's sins, without humble faith. The prayers that are part and parcel of the Catholic Tradition are for the most part, very humble prayers of need, praise, adoration and petition. The Word of God itself often calls for a heart that is honest, humble and trembles at God's Word.

The Word of God that we hear today proclaims the same message about humble faith. The first reading from Zephaniah speaks of a lowly people, the ancestors of Jesus, where God is at work. The Psalm describes God as at work among the poor, the lowly who are blessed. In the second reading we hear again how God chooses the lowly, those who turn to Jesus. Jesus is our wisdom, righteousness, salvation and redemption. He came with a twofold mission: to save, and sanctify. Only the humble experience his power at work within them. And of course in the Gospel are proclaimed the Beatitudes, eight ways of being that are an especially humble way of life.

It is the "poor in spirit" who actually experience the reign of God in their lives. It is the meek and gentle who, as one retreat master put it, have learned to dwell with Jesus in the spacious heart of the Father where there are no limitations or barriers. That is an experience of the reign of God and in a sense, the whole of creation is theirs.

Those who mourn, who suffer losses, yet are strong in faith, are given the Spirit that more than makes up for that loss. Those who suffer injustice, who struggle and pray for fairness, will be satisfied. Those who can forgive, the merciful, can also receive forgiveness and experience the joy of reconciliation in their lives. They who are single-minded, who are pure of heart, who are not divided or chase after false gods, will experience the reign of God in their lives, the peace and serenity of God. They who strive to make peace and reconcile others will truly feel a belonging to God. And they who actually suffer ridicule because of their faith in Jesus are also assured of a place in the reign of God. Their faith and fidelity puts them in the line of all the genuine prophets who have spoken God's Word to others throughout the ages. Truly all genuine spiritualities, as well as the Word of God, teach that humble faith is the *way of life* in the Kingdom of God.

A well known example of a Beatitude person that comes to mind is Jean Vanier, the son of the former governor-general of Canada. Jean gave up a promising career in the army and teaching philosophy, and invited two mentally challenged men to live with him in his house in Troisly, France. His aim was to provide a family setting and a home for these men, not an institution. Those who joined him became volunteers and participants in a new and much more effective way of dealing with mental illness, a movement that has since then become the worldwide movement known as L'Arche, which means Ark, providing homes for the mentally challenged around the world.

One of the hallmarks of L'Arche is the humble acceptance of the mentally challenged as valued and cherished, equal members of the family. This acceptance has allowed an often amazing wisdom to surface. One of the things that Jean has learned and teaches is that if we want to help the poor, then it is best to allow the poor to give something to us, even something as small as a cigarette. The poor are always being given to, something that can demean a person. To allow the poor to give to us, is to accord them dignity and respect, something they crave and thrive upon. Such is the wisdom of L'Arche, of the poor, of the gospel.

The Eucharist that we celebrate now is a humble meal - bread and wine becoming the Body and Blood of Christ. We come out of our need for God's love and healing. We turn to God, who is our wisdom, righteousness, salvation and redemption. God is at work among his humble people even now, transforming us, even as we proclaim God's word, and receive the Body of Christ, into his Body here on earth, and into his Beatitude people. What could be greater than that?

So, let us pray for humble faith, and enter into the Kingdom of God.