

'Sermon' projects voice of Christ

THE BEATITUDES (Mt 5:1-12) probably rank in the top ten most favorite Bible passages. Few people remember all of them, but almost everyone remembers a few. Their upbeat promise of blessedness lures us to accept the difficult challenges they expect. This passage remains a favorite for weddings, funerals, and other special family occasions.

The beatitudes also provide an opportunity to observe how Scripture scholars do their work. Let me take you behind the scenes of this passage to ask three questions: What did Jesus say to the crowd? What did Matthew write in the Gospel? What do we hear in the liturgy? You might assume the answer is the same for all three questions, but many Catholic Scripture scholars disagree.

The problem with figuring out what Jesus actually said to the crowd comes to light when we review how Luke describes this scene (6:20-26). In Matthew, Jesus delivers nine beatitudes in a sermon on a mount. In Luke, he speaks of four beatitudes and four "woes" in a sermon on a plain. A literalist might conclude these are two different sermons, but most scholars in our Church believe that we've got two versions of one sermon. In your family, when people tell famous family stories and sayings, they probably don't always agree on the details. But the original story happened once, and the variations only make it more important.

SO, WHICH evangelist has the story right? We'll never know for certain, but most agree that Luke is closer to the original. It's more likely that Matthew added a few lines once he got into the pattern, than that Luke omitted some sayings of Jesus. In fact, the first three beatitudes in Luke (about the poor, the hungry, and the sor-

rowful) are so similar in structure, it's possible they report most faithfully what Jesus actually said. His message proclaimed hope for the hopeless and the arrival of the kingdom.

Matthew, then probably expanded the list and honed the saying to fit his own audience. Luke says "Blessed are the poor," and Matthew says "Blessed are the poor in spirit." The added phrase is a clue that spiritual wealth was a bigger issue for Matthew's community than economic wealth. Matthew says "theirs is the kingdom of heaven," in place of "kingdom of God." This gives us a clue that he's writing for a community of Christians from Jewish families, because Jews would never speak the name of God aloud in their prayer. They'd substitute some other title. Putting Jesus on a mount, Matthew is able to draw a parallel to Moses who received the law from God on Mt. Sinai. Of course, here, Jesus is giving, not receiving the new code of ethics.

SIGNIFICANTLY, Matthew includes two beatitudes for the persecuted. Matthew very likely wrote for a community of Jews who had chosen to follow Christ, but who found themselves excluded from other Jewish communities. The tension led to hardship, persecution, and the separation of families. Matthew's version of the beatitudes encourages moral living for those who are persecuted, by promising that their hopelessness will change.

When we hear the passage next Sunday, we hear it isolated from the rest of the Sermon on the Mount, and in conjunction with a passage from Zephaniah promoting humility. The Gospel summons us to examine our behaviors and attitudes, and gives us strength in the midst of our sufferings today.

So, what Jesus said was probably shorter than what Matthew wrote, and what Matthew wrote was intended for an audience different from us. But what we hear is still the voice of Christ resounding from generation to generation into our hearts to proclaim the eternal promise of beatitude. □

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Fr. Paul Turner



the
Good News
God's word in
everyday living

Daily Scripture Readings

Third Sunday in Ordinary Time Sunday, January 21

Isaiah 9:1-3
Psalms 27:1, 4, 13-14
1 Corinthians 1:10-13, 17
Matthew 4:12-23

Monday, January 22
2 Samuel 5:1-7, 10
Psalms 89:20-22, 25-26
Mark 3:22-30

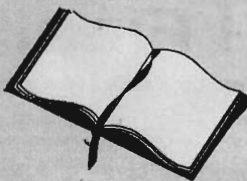
Tuesday, January 23
2 Samuel 6:12b-15, 17-19
Psalms 24:7-10
Mark 3:31-35

Wednesday, January 24
2 Samuel 7:4-17
Psalms 89:4-5, 27-30
Mark 4:1-20

Thursday, January 25
Acts 22:3-16
Psalms 117:1-2
Mark 16:15-18

Friday, January 26
2 Timothy 1:1-8
Psalms 96:1-3, 7-8, 10
Mark 4:26-34

Saturday, January 27
2 Samuel 12:1-7a, 10-17
Psalms 51:12-17
Mark 4:35-41



**Fourth Sunday
in Ordinary Time
Sunday, January 28**
Zephaniah 2:3; 3:12-13
Psalms 146:6-10
1 Corinthians 1:26-31
Matthew 5:1-12a