

Homily for the 4th Sunday of Ordinary Time - Cycle A

**Cathedral of the Immaculate Conception
Springfield, Illinois**

February 1, 2026

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My dear brothers and sisters in Christ:

In Saint Matthew's Gospel, there is much mention of "the Good News." Jesus proclaims that the kingdom of God is at hand, and that people should repent and believe the Good News, but we are not really told what this Good News actually is. Jesus next challenges Simon and Andrew, James and John, to stop what they are doing and follow Him. They are not told where they are going. So far, there is a building sense of excitement, but no detail about the Good News. The Gospel then gives a summary of Jesus' activity. He preaches in synagogues, He heals sick people; this does begin to sound like Good News for those involved, but we suspect there must be more to come - and this is the point we reach in today's Gospel.

The scope of the Good News is outlined in full in the Sermon on the Mount, which Jesus now preaches in His first of five public sermons spread throughout the Gospel of Matthew. Today's passage consists of the famous introduction, which we know as the Beatitudes. These sayings constitute one

of the most familiar of all Gospel passages. It is used in the liturgy of the Church more than any other Gospel text, covering a surprising range from ordinary Sundays and weekdays to major seasons, from funerals to weddings, and on a variety of commemorations, sacramental ceremonies and saints' days. It is the first passage in the Gospel of Matthew to give a clear indication of what Jesus means by the Good News.

The scene is set in a very formal way. The one who proclaims the Good News assumes the role of an authoritative teacher. In New Testament times, teachers simply sat down in an open space and began to teach. Their ability as teachers was reflected in the size of the audience that gathered round to listen to them. Matthew says that Jesus saw a large crowd (presumably waiting for Him), and He sat down and taught them. In the Beatitudes, He makes plain what the Good News consists of: it is the possession of the kingdom of heaven. This is stressed at both the beginning and the end of the list: the kingdom of heaven belongs to those who are poor in spirit, and to those who are persecuted in the cause of right.

Jesus begins his primary teaching with the Beatitudes, a title that stems from the Latin noun *beātitudō*, meaning "happy" or "blessed." Bishop Robert Barron suggests that the Greek word *makarios*, which is used to start each of

the Beatitudes and is usually rendered as “blessed” or “happy,” may also be translated as “lucky.” Thus, “Blessed are the poor in spirit” might be understood as, “How lucky you are if you are not addicted to material things.” Here Jesus is telling us how to realize our deepest desire, which is the desire for God and not for passing things that only bring temporary comfort.¹ The beatitudes are the formula for finding true happiness.

Matthew portrays Jesus as an authoritative teacher. He assumes His official position by sitting down to teach. The location on a mountain recalls where other official teachers positioned themselves—for example, Moses. While Jesus is similar to Moses, He is also greater. Jesus is the teacher of Israel. As such, He is here interpreting the Old Law for a new Israel. These beatitudes have often been called the *Magna Carta* of the kingdom of heaven.

Each beatitude has two parts. The first one generally describes some situation that reflects diminishment. This diminishment, however, is only temporary because ultimately it will be transformed into something positive, something reflecting abundance. Because of this transformation, the recipient is declared “blessed.” Special attention is often given to the first beatitude where the “poor in spirit” are blessed to receive the “kingdom of heaven.” Poor in spirit extends poverty beyond the realm of the material.

People who are poor in spirit realize how dependent they are on God's grace in order to experience a good life. Receiving the kingdom of heaven is as good as it gets.

Beatitudes may be understood as opportunities for growth. The dynamic of going from diminishment to abundance is not the only way to understand a beatitude. Several of them challenge the recipient to moral growth. The meek, the merciful, the clean of heart, and the peacemakers all have opportunities to grow from their current dispositions. They are all considered blessed because moral growth is a possibility for them. This is how the kingdom of heaven works.

The Good News is that the kingdom of God is at hand. Jesus turned word into action when He cured sick people, cleansed lepers, forgave sinners; that is when He made the words of the Beatitudes a concrete reality for those whose lives were broken. As we enter into the Holy Sacrifice of the Mass, let us commit ourselves to follow Jesus on His saving way of the cross, to allow the Spirit of Jesus to penetrate our spirit, by following His example of putting His words into action in our lives.

May God give us this grace. Amen.

¹ <https://www.wordonfire.org/reflections/b-ordinary-wk10-monday/>