

**2 - BLESSED ARE THE PEOPLE/ THE NATIONS  
(THE BEATITUDES)**

*Tuesday, July 16, 2013*



**LECTIO / Reading: Matthew 5, 1-16**

1. When he saw the crowds he went up on the mountainside. After he had sat down his disciples gathered around him, 2 and he began to teach them:
3. "How blest are the poor in spirit:  
the reign of God is theirs.
4. Blest too are the sorrowing;  
they shall be consoled.
5. Blest are the lowly;  
they shall inherit the land.
6. Blest are they who hunger and thirst for holiness,  
they shall have their fill.
7. Blest are they who show mercy;  
mercy shall be theirs.
8. Blest are the single-hearted  
for they shall see God.
9. Blest too the peacemakers;  
they shall be called sons of God.
10. Blest are those persecuted for holiness' sake:  
the reign of God is theirs.
11. Blest are you when they insult you and persecute you and utter every kind of slander against you because of me.
12. Be glad and rejoice, for your reward is great in heaven:  
they persecuted the prophets before you in the very same way.
13. "You are the salt of the earth. But what if salt goes flat? How can you restore its flavor?  
Then is good for nothing but to be thrown out and trampled under foot.
14. "You are the light of the world . A city set on the hill cannot be hidden.
15. Men do not light a lamp and then put it under a bushel basket. They set it on a stand where it gives light to all in the house.
16. In the same way, your light must shine before men so that they may see the goodness in your acts and give praise to your heavenly Father.

## **MEDITATIO / Explanation and background of the text**

Much can be said about the beatitudes. They constitute the beginning and the core of Jesus' Sermon on the Mount in this gospel. Jesus goes up the mountainside. He does this in the way Moses and Elijah climbed the mountain. However here we do not have a direct encounter with God as in the case with Moses and Elijah, nor does Jesus receive ten commandments which he in turn must announce. Rather he proclaims to his disciples and the people around them eight beatitudes.

From the start with these beatitudes Jesus makes it clear what is, according to him, central in the relationship with God and the mutual relationship among people. The beatitudes are therefore blessings which describe the covenant that God wants to establish with his people. They are an announcement of what for Jesus is the core of this covenant. Eight groups of people are addressed in these beatitudes. They make up the core of the proclamation of the gospel and are the chosen ones of God.

The Old Testament knows many beatitudes. All the beatitudes in Matthew's gospel have indeed deep Old Testament roots. If you are familiar with the psalms you might have noticed this already. He who knows Isaiah and Jeremiah hears the refrain of what these prophets put down on paper. They refer to the poor among the people. In God's eyes these poor ones are precious. They show that he who turns to God becomes a different kind of person: meek, humble, peaceful etc.

Two words are central in the prophets' proclamation which also form the core in the Sermon on the Mount: mercy and justice. They are a nice biblical pair of words which form the essence of God's being. They are two words which form the core of a life based on the gospel. Justice for Matthew is the word for God's doing: not to strive for your own advantage, but the rights of all. Mercy for Matthew is the word for God's will: not to go after your own advantage (the Dutch text says *oordeel*, but I think it should be *voordeel*???) but to look out for others, to invite others to conversion, and to give them a realistic chance at conversion, whoever they may be, whatever they have done, and to forgive them seventy times seven.

It is for good reason that Matthew hints twice to a text in Hosea, where it says that God does not ask for sacrifices, but for mercy (Matthew 9,13 and 12,7). The prayer for forgiveness in the Our Father points to Matthew 6,14-15. Jesus blesses those who make this life style of mercy and justice their own. In this way the beatitudes contain a challenge to have a close look at one's own life style.

The change at the end of the beatitudes is therefore interesting. The ninth beatitude addresses directly the listeners (and of course also to the readers of the text): "Blessed are you".

Whoever accepts this gospel life style as his own, does not make it easy for himself. He might well end up at the margin of society. Even worse: he will be insulted, persecuted, and slandered. Yet, Jesus maintains that this is the only way to a good life. He says: rejoice, for you are in good company, for they did same to the prophets. This persecution is a reflection

of Jesus' own experiences and those of the early Christians. The eight beatitudes also relate to the works of mercy mentioned at the end of Matthew's gospel (Matthew 25). . He who cares for the hungry, the thirsty, the alien, the naked, sick and prisoners understands the beatitudes and is a blessed man (Matthew 25, 34).

For those who dare to choose this way Jesus says something special. Again he speaks to the listeners and therefore also to the readers, directly with "You". He gives two qualities to those who join: they are the light and they are the salt. In a certain sense they are synonymous in this text. Both have become a part of the baptismal liturgy:

- Light is the light of Christ., lit at Easter night. It may shine in our lives, and we may be light

in turn for others. Light hints immediately to the beginning of creation. And God said, let there be light. and there was light." (Genesis 1,3) Without light there is no life. Light is the first organizing element that we know. Through light we can distinguish. Light also points out the way. Jesus invites us to do what light does for all people.

- Salt has other roots. Salt has to do with payment. Salary is derived from the Latin word for

salt (salus). Salt has to do with flavor, while certain salts have to do with the fertility of the land.

Salt is also a symbol of wisdom and of eternal life. Jesus says therefore that his disciples are to have these qualities. If this is not so than their discipleship is without content. The last sentence of this passage points to the purpose of it all: with light and salt our own good deeds become visible. Or to put it in other words: by being light and salt Jesus' disciples are able to do good deeds and even more people are able to glorify the Father in heaven.

Notes

## CONTEMPLATIO / Reflection

To pray a blessing over another person is something special. We do not do that so easily, but those who are familiar with scripture know that it is a good custom. We pray a blessing over every meal. We do not usually say a blessing over the people we relate to. Yes, in the liturgy we do it. But we become timid at table, or at the end of a conversation, or at the end of a class at school, or at someone's sickbed.

An additional step is to know yourself to be a blessed person because we know what Jesus or God has said about us. This is also difficult for us. We often underestimate ourselves. Yet it is Jesus himself who says a number of blessings over the people. Not over the high and mighty, strong ones and smart ones, but over people who dedicate themselves to a quality of life: meekness, justice, mercy, purity, peace making. He says a blessing over people who have a hard time, people in sorrow, those who are poor in spirit, people persecuted for justice, or persecuted for Jesus' name.

The basilica St. John Lateran is the mother and the head of all churches. The chair of the bishop of Rome is in that church. The church has an octagonal baptismal chapel. In that chapel the recently deceased bishop Martinus Muskens (former bishop of the diocese of Breda in The Netherlands) said a blessing prayer over all of the two thousand people who were making a pilgrimage with him to the tombs of the holy apostles Peter and Paul. Standing before the baptismal font through which all of us have passed, he blessed every pilgrim with these words: "Let your life be a reflection of your baptism." On the square before the bishop's home for the diocese of Breda is a work of art which represents this blessing. This blessing prayer is a radical statement which challenges every Christian to make real that he is a baptized person.

At the baptism of each Christian we see three central elements: water, oil, and fire. Water is the image of the rebirth as a child of God. Oil is a symbol of the anointing with the Spirit. We use chrism which means oil or balm, Christ as in Christ, the anointed one. Everyone who wants to belong to Christ, is called a Christian. Fire is the fire of Easter night and the Easter candle. Light goes before us. We find light in Christ. We may be light for all around us. Sometimes the baptizer uses salt in the baptismal celebration, a sign of flavor, of wisdom, of everlasting life. We do not always pause at the origin of these symbols. All these symbols are borrowed directly from the gospels.

We have heard how Jesus addressed his disciples directly and said: you are the salt; you are the light. We heard how we are called to make our lives a reflection of our baptism. If we allow the meaning of baptism to penetrate our minds then that will characterize every aspect of our lives.

Gospel based living calls for being witnesses to Christ in everything. Gospel based living means to do good, and that goodness must become visible in us. To do good is to work for peace and justice, mercy, meekness, humility, brotherhood. To do good we practice the works of mercy: to console the the sorrowing, to feed the hungry, to give drink to the thirsty, to shelter the homeless, to clothe the naked, to visit the sick and prisoners. To do good is to

be a blessing for the people around us and in this way to be a blessing for all people on earth. This gives color to our lives and in this way one shows what the gospel means in daily life.

Notes

*We interrupt for a moment. Someone read the bible passage one more time out loud.*

*Now let us remain silent for a while to allow these thoughts to enter into our minds and hearts. The time of silence may vary, about 10 minutes.*

## COLLATIO / Sharing

We all sit together as one group or in smaller groups. We enter into a conversation about the bible passage and the meditation and share the insights we have gained. What strikes you?, what bothers you?, what does it stir in you?, how does the passage challenge you?, You can discuss this by using the following questions:

- Share with each other what it means to you that you are baptized.
- What does the following prayer mean to you: "Let your life be a reflection of your baptism"?
- Share with each other what it means to you that you know you are blessed.
- To be a blessed person is a blessing for others. What does Jesus call to be the salt and light imply for you?

Notes

## **ORATIO/Prayer**

We conclude our conversation with a prayer. We can pray spontaneously or we can conclude with a standard prayer which relates to the contents of our conversation. In this prayer words, images and motifs of the bible passage or the meditation may be used.

Prayer