

Good Shepherd Lutheran Church, Lena, IL – 29 January 2023
Fourth Sunday after Epiphany - Year A – Lectionary 4

1st Reading: *Micah 6:1-8*

Psalm: 15

2nd Reading: *I Corinthians 1:18-31*

Gospel: *Matthew 5:1-12*

Sermon - Vicar Thomas J. Mosbø

In the name of the Father, ✠ and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.

Try our product, and in three weeks we guarantee that you will feel true meekness.

Or, how about:

Do you suffer from being unmerciful? Ask your doctor to prescribe our product and before you know it you will be showing mercy to everyone around you. Common side effects may be peace of mind, a longer life, and a deeper relationship with God.

Have you ever heard a commercial like that? I certainly haven't. We hear instead how this or that product or medication will make us feel empowered, stronger, more confident. We want self-assertiveness training, not training on how to be pure of heart or how to rejoice when we are persecuted for our faith in God.

Jesus' words are so familiar to us that it is difficult for us to realise just how shocking they really were when he spoke them. Blessed are the poor in spirit, those who hunger and thirst for righteousness, and yes, blessed are those who are persecuted. We don't want to be any of those things.

Paul knew how the words and deeds of Jesus seemed like utter nonsense to the world: "God decided, through the foolishness of our proclamation, to save those who believe. For Jews demand signs and Greeks desire wisdom, but we proclaim Christ crucified, a stumbling block to Jews and foolishness to Gentiles."

What kind of God allows himself to be beaten and whipped, then tortured to death in one of the most inhumane ways ever devised by man? Blessed are those who are persecuted?

I recently read a true story about a Jewish woman who was put in prison, but was given the Gospel of Matthew to read. She had never been exposed to anything about Christianity and had never heard of Jesus. But as she read this little book, which is so Jewish in character, she began to like this Rabbi she was reading about and how wonderful his teachings were. But then she got near the end and read in horror the story of his false arrest, his unjust trial, and of how he was condemned to death. She found herself cheering for Jesus, and waiting expectantly for him to save the day, show how powerful God was, and come down miraculously from the cross. But no, instead, he died.

For a long time, she couldn't bring herself to read the last chapter, but when she did, she was again totally amazed. Jesus rose from the dead. But he still didn't do what she expected. He didn't come to Pontius Pilate or to Caiaphas and say "I told you so". Instead, he appeared to only a few people, his closest friends and disciples. She felt the truth of the story and began to understand that God worked in ways that were very different from what she had expected. And she became a Christian.

We are used to thinking about God being all powerful. He can do whatever he wants, and if we believe in him then he will do whatever we want for us. But that really isn't the way the Bible describes God. Again and again, God's seems to give up his own infinite power to be gracious. He created the world, and created mankind, us. But did he make us be good and do what he commanded? That's what we would expect from an almighty God. No, instead he gave *us* the power to choose whether to obey him or not.

And as we know from the Bible and from our own experience, we haven't done a very good job of shaping the world the way we want it to be. My own choices have often caused more harm than good, to others and to myself. Yet I still go on, blundering in my own self-centred way, defying the life that God wants me to live.

And ultimately, how does God save the world from the mistakes and malice, the mess that we humans have made of the world with our power, self-confidence, and willfulness? Does he swoop in like the hero in so many movies and kill all the bad guys? No, instead he allows himself to be killed by the bad guys [and that includes you and me].

What kind of a God is this? Paul admits that this seems like foolishness, but then he goes on: "to those who are called, both Jews and Greeks, Christ [is] the power of God and the wisdom of God. For God's foolishness is wiser than human wisdom, and God's weakness is stronger than human strength. God chose what is foolish in the world to shame the wise; God chose what is weak in the world to shame the strong."

The foolishness and weakness of Jesus dying on the cross means that God has given his own life to us so that we, too, can give life to others. “In this is love, not that we have loved God but that he loved us and sent his Son to be the atoning sacrifice for our sins. Beloved, if God so loved us, we also ought to love one another. No one has ever seen God; but if we love one another, God abides in us and his love is perfected in us. By this we know that we abide in him and he in us, because he has given us of his Spirit.”

Those who are meek - who hunger and thirst for righteousness, who are merciful and pure of heart - are those who have received Jesus' Spirit, and who therefore are enabled to live as he lived: for others, not for themselves. Through our baptism, the Holy Spirit abides in us, and so we can live as God intended us to live - in love toward one another, even though that seems foolish in the eyes of the world.

Today we have our annual meeting, and it may seem tedious and far removed from what Jesus was teaching, but it is the way in which we will shape our life together for the coming year, in which we will affirm our desire and our intentions as Christ's church to live for others in purity of heart, hungering and thirsting for God's wisdom to be lived out in and through us, in the name of our Lord and Saviour, Jesus Christ.

Amen!

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