**Weekend of Sunday, January 29, 2022**

**4th Sunday after Epiphany/Lectionary 4/Year A**

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

**Second Reading: 1 Corinthians 1:18-31**

**Gospel Reading: Matthew 5:1-12**

**Sermon Title: *“The Real World vs. The New World”***

**Theme**

Jesus opens the Sermon on the Mount by naming those who are blessed in the reign of God.

**Texts:**

**Gospel: Matthew 5:1-12**

1When Jesus saw the crowds, he went up the mountain; and after he sat down, his disciples came to him. 2Then he began to speak, and taught them, saying:
 3“Blessed are the poor in spirit, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven.
 4“Blessed are those who mourn, for they will be comforted.
 5“Blessed are the meek, for they will inherit the earth.
 6“Blessed are those who hunger and thirst for righteousness, for they will be filled.
 7“Blessed are the merciful, for they will receive mercy.
 8“Blessed are the pure in heart, for they will see God.
 9“Blessed are the peacemakers, for they will be called children of God.
 10“Blessed are those who are persecuted for righteousness’ sake, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven.
 11“Blessed are you when people revile you and persecute you and utter all kinds of evil against you falsely on my account. 12Rejoice and be glad, for your reward is great in heaven, for in the same way they persecuted the prophets who were before you.”

**Sermon**

“We Prepare You For the *Real* World!”

That’s what one of the many small junior colleges in NE Ohio claimed in an advertisement on mid-day television. It’s quite a claim for a college – “we prepare you for the *real* world.” One of the difficulties with that ad though is that it implies that there is some sort of working consensus on just what the *real* world actually is. It implies that the *real* world is a fixed, agreed-upon commodity, rather than a highly conflicted notion full of ambiguity. Just what is the *real* world?

Your individual view of reality is going to determine how you act. How you live in the world is related to what sort of world you think we have. When it comes to ethics, I expect that most of us are practical, utilitarian people. After all, we are Americans. Most of us do not live our lives to some grand high-sounding creed, or mission statement. Most of us don’t even live our lives based on the directives of scripture. Simply, we live based on “what works.” Am I right?

I say all of this because I find that in my experience, the primary accusation against the spiritual life, the Christian life, at times even by Christians is that it is *not real*. The Christian way of life simply doesn’t match up with the facts.

“I think sometimes the non-violent way of Jesus makes sense, but it doesn’t really match up with the real world,” someone says. “Turn the other cheek and what do you get? Two bruised cheeks!”

Last weekend I watched a movie entitled, "Official Secrets" which is the true story about the US bullying our allies into the Iraq wars based on information that the US knew was false at worst or sketchy at best. So that is why the Iraq wars are on my mind and in this sermon.

How many times have you heard something like this on the nightly news? “After September 11, he felt the patriotic call to do something, and so he put down the tools of his vocation and enlisted in the military.” The NFL player, Pat Tillman, comes to mind.

And then these days without an American war, we have American mercenaries who join the Ukrainian army. Make no mistake, my heart hurts for Ukraine and Russia’s unprovoked paranoid attack on another sovereign nation. But I am fascinated and disturbed by how easy it is for some of us Americans to put down our productive tools for participating in a peaceful and productive society and grab hold of a weapon of retaliation.

“Well, all that Jesus stuff is okay, but sometimes you have got to get *real*,” says another.

After the first war in Iraq began in 1990, several notable Christian leaders were invited to the National Cathedral in Washington for a service of prayer. President George H. Bush, being an Episcopalian, had met earlier with the presiding bishop of the Episcopal Church. The bishop had urged President Bush *not* to bomb Iraq, to give sanctions a chance, and to work through diplomacy to settle our differences. Basically, President Bush told the bishop that sometimes, as the president, you have to face up to *reality*.

The bishop, urging restraint, came off looking rather wimp-ish. President George H. Bush, who had earlier been accused of being a wimp, came off looking practical, pragmatic, realistic, a leader, presidential.

I was not a pastor back in 1990, but if I was honest, I was discerning a call to ministry, and I still remember being confronted with the question, “Just what is a realistic Christian viewpoint?" Maybe you struggle with this too. We want to live Christian lives, but we don’t want to be seen as unpatriotic or un-American either. What are we to do?

Perhaps you can imagine why I have all this on my mind this morning. Few biblical texts are as “unreal” as today’s Beatitudes from the Sermon on the Mount.

Blessed are you? Rejoice and be glad? This sounds like a recipe for being a full-time doormat for the world. Of course, it sounds that way because *we know the “real world.”* In the real world, if someone hits you on the right cheek, and you offer the left, then you end up with two bruised cheeks. If you agree to carry someone’s burden for two miles, then the same people usually ask that you carry it for ten and then it just becomes your responsibility. In the real world, the meek get taken advantage of.

Let's admit that we are begging the prior question, "Who defines what is real?"

In a sermon following September 11, Tony Campolo, a best-selling author and Baptist minister, wondered how different our history would be if, after the first war with Iraq, we had not attempted a complete embargo, indirectly leading to the deaths of at least 100,000 Iraqis, mostly children, from malnutrition and lack of medical care. He further wondered what would have happened if we had taken all our military and political might and had simply dumped tons of food and medicine on Iraq. Do you think Sadaam Hussein would be able to keep his iron grip on that people and land? What if, rather than violating the holy places of Islam, we had violated the grip of a corrupt Islamic dictator with our prodigal generosity? Do you think the people of Iraq would have positively responded to our pleas to join the peaceful nations of the world? Please don’t tell me what you think. I have many of the same thoughts.

Second-guessing President George W. Bush’s decision to again go to war in Iraq back in 2003 is cheap these days. It is this president's war that the movie, "Official Secrets" is about. At one point, there is a press conference where someone asked if there would have been enough planes and ships to transport $1.1 Trillion worth of food and medicine and goods (the amount the US alone spent in that war that we have since walked away from), not to mention the savings of 7000 American lives, and the countless wounded physically and emotionally, … and the one being questioned was simply speechless – didn’t even know how to respond to the question.

I know what many of you are thinking: “Crazy are the peacemakers. We simply can’t allow tyranny in the world!”

Jesus cast a vision of a new world coming. Jesus promises:

* laughter to those who mourn,
* blessedness to those who are victims of injustice,
* triumph to those who do not repay evil for evil.

Jesus himself was a sign of that new world, the first outbreak of the kingdom of heaven, a signal that, by the grace of God, reality was making a fundamental shift.

It’s odd; some people think that the purpose of the Christian faith is to get us ready to forsake this cold cruel world for another. Christianity is where we get our entrance ticket to heaven, our passport into eternal life. And it is true, that when Jesus begins this sermon, he speaks in the future tense. The whole new world that he describes is not here yet, not in its fullness. There is plenty of old world around for people to think that is the only world there is.

But in this sermon, Jesus switches from the future tense to the present tense. He tells us what to do, here and now, if we want to be part of the new world that is coming. He gives us the privilege of being a beachhead, a first wave of that new world. Every time we forgive or do not return evil for evil, we show our citizenship in that new world. A little piece of the new reality becomes visible in and through us.

“Yea right, bleeding heart liberal!” “The trouble with you preachers is that you are always talking about something so far removed from the *real* world, where I *really* live, as to be incomprehensible. Keep your sermons close to the *real* world.”

**Raisin’ the Bar Challenge**

You see I can read your minds! And I take that criticism as a homiletical compliment. Where did you get the idea that a preacher ought to defer to our world? I think most good sermons quarrel with the popular definitions of “the real world.” My job is not to address the world where we currently reside. Rather, my job is to try to get us to move our citizenship to Jesus’s new world where all he preached has possibility, but only if we who call ourselves his disciples participate fully.

Last weekend, the Gospel Reading included mention that after his baptism, Jesus went about proclaiming that the Kingdom of Heaven has come near. Last weekend I said, “When Jesus said, the kingdom of heaven has come near, and asked his disciples of every time and place, including us in the present time, to proclaim the good news, we are part of bringing it ever closer to its completion.”

In this week’s Gospel Reading, Jesus gives us the Beatitudes as a more definitive glimpse at what it looks like so we can know what we need to do. How are you doing with that?

**Prayer**

Lord Jesus, help us to face facts, to get real, to admit to the truth. But also help us to see how your presence, your words, and your work contest the world’s definitions of what is real. Then, having seen the real world that you offer to us, give us the courage to come forth and be part of your vision of the world you created; your kingdom, where you reign now and forever. We pray this in your holy name. Amen.