

## **HOMILY for 4<sup>th</sup> SUNDAY in ORDINARY TIME – Year A**

This Sunday's Readings talk about God's blessings on the lowly & the humble. Pondering on that message, I'm reminded of this cute story.

The pastor's desk was in need of repair; so he went out & bought a new one. The trouble was that some assembly was required. After two hours of trying to put it together, the frazzled pastor walked out to where his secretary was working. "Being handy is not one of my spiritual gifts!" he exclaimed. "The store told me that a child can assemble this. Can you run out & borrow a child for me?"

Sometimes the lowly can do amazing things like that. Anyhow, prophet Zephaniah has this advice for us in today's First Reading, "Seek the Lord, all you humble of the earth... Seek justice, seek humility; perhaps you may be sheltered on the day of the Lord's anger. I will leave a remnant in your midst a people humble & lowly... They shall do no wrong & speak no lies; nor shall there be found in their mouths a deceitful tongue." Evidently we're called to seek the Lord, justice, & humility. I can see that we should look for the Lord in this life & hence receive lots of good benefits & blessings. But, I wonder why we should seek justice & humility. Prophet Zephaniah must have seen a lot of benefits in possessing justice & humility so that he had asked the people of God to search for them.

To help us appreciate the vision of prophet Zephaniah & see why he'd like everyone to seek justice & humility, let me take you back to ancient Greece & introduce you to the founders of philosophy, namely, Socrates & Plato. I had to read a lot about these two philosophers & many others for my philosophy major. In case you don't know anything about philosophy, its writing is quite dense & dry. You might have read a dozen of pages in philosophy, but you would have no idea what you just read. So, you can imagine how difficult it was for someone who had to learn in English like me to read one philosophy book after another. It was quite painful & challenging for me. But, here is what I learned about Socrates & Plato.

Socrates was a man of principle who believed that people should care less about their bodies & possessions & more about their souls. He once said, "Wealth does not bring goodness; but goodness brings wealth." That is why Christianity & other religions have encouraged their faithful to embrace their souls & virtues like goodness. Socrates often identified knowledge with virtue. If knowledge can be learned, so can virtue. He also believed that one must seek knowledge & wisdom before private interests. He thought that "the unexamined life is not worth living." For Socrates, the four main virtues that society should promote are courage, moderation, wisdom, & justice. Now you can see why prophet Zephaniah asked the world to seek justice & humility.

The next ancient philosopher that can help us understand prophet Zephaniah much better is Plato. He was a student of Socrates. He believed that well-being, happiness, high virtue, & right moral action are the epitome of ethical practice & life. He thought that a well-run society should practice these four cardinal virtues, namely, wisdom, courage, moderation, & justice. Basically he shared the same virtues with Socrates & wished that every member of a society would live by those virtues. If every citizen practices those virtues, the whole society would be peaceful & prosperous. I think that is something that every city, state, & federal officials, especially every politician should keep in mind as they try to organize & build up a harmonious community for their citizen. Without virtuous citizens, they would never succeed in

creating a harmonious & thriving society. Now we can understand why prophet Zephaniah called on the people of God to search for justice & humility. For these two virtues are the cornerstone of a peaceful society & the transforming power for an individual.

But, it's not just ancient philosophers & wise figures like prophet Zephaniah who would appreciate the importance of virtues. Apparently Jesus was another one who put virtues above everything else. His whole life was full of teachings about virtues & examples on how to turn our world into a virtuous one. He constantly taught the people of God on how to live a virtuous life & showed the scribes & Pharisees how that life might look like. Most of His miracles, if not all of them, were packed with lessons about virtues. Unfortunately, people did not get it most of the time. That is why He tried to pack quite a few virtues into His important teaching of the Beatitudes. Let me point out some of them in today's Gospel for us. Jesus sat down & taught, "How blest are the poor in spirit: the Kingdom of God is theirs... Blest too are the lowly: they shall inherit the land. Blest are they who hunger & thirst for holiness; they shall have their fill." He continued, "...Blest are they who show mercy; mercy shall be theirs... Blest too the peacemakers; they shall be called sons & daughters of God."

As you can see, Jesus praised the lowly & the ones who desire holiness. He also blessed & encouraged people who show mercy & peace to others. He clearly wanted His Church to focus on virtues & a life of holiness. That's why He did not call on people to rise up & fight the Romans, their occupying political power. Unfortunately, His Church has slowly embraced politics & worldly power over the years. It has focused more on political fights instead of encouraging its members to foster a personal virtuous life. It has spent lots of its effort & resources on political issues instead of promoting much more on virtues like Jesus did. It has veered away from the main focus of its founder & left many of its members spiritually starved & lost in this bewildering world. That is why it has made itself irrelevant to many lost souls & unattractive to the younger generation. It needs to focus a lot more on issues that matter to the spiritual life & the daily struggles of the common folks. It has to show the world that it cares about the pain & suffering of the lowly like Jesus did in the Beatitudes. Otherwise, it will gradually become another old institution of the world that would not matter to an average Joe.

My dear brothers & sisters, a peaceful & thriving society would only exist if each & every citizen would embrace a life of virtues & practice it every day. Once that happens, we would have an ideal society that ancient philosophers & wise figures have dreamt about. We would be able to avoid all the social problems, especially the mass shootings & violent acts that we currently hear on the news every day. More importantly, each of us would be able to master lots of virtues & get ourselves closer to true happiness & the Kingdom of Heaven.