

67

THE CHURCH OF THE BEATITUDES

Fourth Sunday of Ordinary Time

29 January 1978

Zephaniah 2:3; 3:12-13

1 Corinthians 1:26-31

Matthew 5:1-12

The gospel scene you just heard, dear sisters and brothers, is still relevant today (Matt 5:1). The great crowds drawing near to Jesus have still not got close enough. Here we are this morning, those of us who have come to the cathedral or have gathered together in some church or chapel to reflect on the word of God. We are all part of the crowd that draws near to Jesus. «And he began to teach them» (Matt 5:2). This teaching of Jesus is prolonged and comes alive in our midst so that Jesus is always felt to be present among the people, in society, in the family, and in the community groups that seek to nourish themselves on these divine orientations.

That is why, sisters and brothers, this is a solemn moment for me, this moment when we celebrate the 8:00 o'clock Mass here in the cathedral and communicate with so many communities in the archdiocese by radio. It is the moment of the Sermon on the Mount, a moment when we all feel that we are together with Jesus. He is the teacher, and I am only his humble repeater. He is the one who wants to teach you and me how to walk toward the happiness of the Beatitudes. That is why, sisters and brothers, I am always concerned in my preaching each Sunday to place the eternal and ever timely teaching of Jesus in the framework of the realities that we experience. Each one of us must strive to make this eternal word real for ourselves, our family, and our people. This eternal word is valid for all people but in different ways according to the needs and circumstances of each person. That is why I take care to tell you about at least some of the most outstanding events of the week.

Events of the week

This week, for example, the archbishop's office saw one of the signs of the times when we were visited by the Assistant Secretary of State of the United States, Mr. Todman¹. While in El Salvador he visited our office, where we had a very cordial conversation. I highlight here some things we discussed. He told me that zeal for human rights is part of his life. We should be aware that he is a black man, which means that in the United States he has experienced very anti-Christian discrimination. Because of his life and his race, therefore, he feels the right of equality to be something deeply engraved in his being.

I was also pleased to hear how his own thinking coincides with the thinking of the church, especially when he stated that the root of all violence and terrorism is the unjust social

¹ Terence A. Todman, Assistant Secretary of State for Inter-American Affairs of the United States, interviewed Archbishop Romero on 27 January 1978. See *La Prensa Gráfica* (28 January 1978).

situation in which people live. He went on to say that the structures of a country should be made to function for the benefit of all its people. If those structures are not adequate to achieve the common good, then there is an obligation to change them because human beings are not made to serve structures; rather, structures must serve the human person—I add this principle from the Gospel (Mark 2:27). Applying this wise saying, I say that this is indeed what the church is saying. Political, economic, and social structures must be adapted so as to enable Salvadorans to grow and develop with all the freedom and dignity God has given them. If there are any structures that do not serve the common good, then they must be changed. Mister Todman also understood when I personally told him that good relations between the church and government should not be for anyone's personal benefit or prestige but for the positive service of the people. He told me, «I like to hear those words».

Also, sisters and brothers, I want to mention another very significant visit. Some good Christians from Catholic Solidarity of Holland wanted to travel to our country and learn of our situation; they promised us their help and solidarity. I want to thank them publicly and communicate to you, dear Catholics and radio audience, the joy of this communion with those friends from Holland. This is what the church is: a communion in which the merits, joys, and sufferings of each Christian redound to the good of all Christians. Let us always keep in mind these generous gestures of solidarity that have been shown to our church of the Archdiocese of San Salvador, and let us learn how to identify with the concerns and anxieties of other dioceses in other lands. This is what it means to live as family, as the family of God extended throughout the world.

Yesterday in the parish of Apopa the people commemorated the first anniversary of the expulsion of their pastor, Father Mario Bernal. I want to speak about this event to clarify what the church desires with respect to these priests who have been expelled from the country or prevented from entering. It is not true that I am demanding that they be allowed to enter; what I am asking is that their cases be reviewed. Why were they expelled? Justice, as well as the reputation of the church and the reputation of each priest, demands this. We do not want these priests to be burdened by the false accusations that caused them to be expelled: «They are communists, they are subversives, they don't respect the country's laws». I ask only that these accusations be clarified. If they are guilty, let them be punished. But if they have been expelled for no valid reason, then this attitude is not just. Again, let it be clear, I am not asking for their return, but I am asking that the causes for their expulsion be re-examined.

The life of the church

In the life of the church, dear sisters and brothers, we have many interesting and consoling things to report. We greet the new pastor of María Auxiliadora, Father Giraudo. He is replacing Father Alas, who is now assisting Bishop Rivera in Santiago de María.

I had a very delightful time yesterday afternoon in Chalatenango. A small group of high school students helped to inaugurate the minor seminary that bears the name of the patron of Chalatenango, Saint John the Baptist. This new seminary gives great hope to that department that is so rich in vocations. Now that it has a center for ecclesiastical education, we are certain that it will bring us many priestly consolations. We want to congratulate Father Fabián Amaya and all those who have collaborated in making this dream of a seminary in Chalatenango come true. I also inform you now that within a few days classes will begin in San José de la Montaña, and as I've told you previously, both the minor and the major seminary are filled to capacity. In

the minor seminary are the young men who are finishing their high school studies, and in major seminary are those high school grads who are pursuing their studies of philosophy and theology. In both of these centers the Lord has blessed our archdiocese with an abundance of vocations. I ask you to give thanks to the Lord for these blessings.

I now say to the whole diocese what I said yesterday in Chalatenango: I want the whole people of God to feel that the work of the seminary belongs to them because this is really true. The renewal of the priesthood with these young men called to serve God gives joy and hope to the whole people, not just the bishop. That's why we need everyone to pray and give their moral support to these young men. We should encourage them so that they don't feel that they are alone or doing something strange. We want them to feel that they are being prepared for service and that the people anxiously await them and will receive them with kindness.

Let us therefore provide our seminary with an environment of moral support. At the same time, I am not ashamed to ask also for your financial support. We have undertaken a tremendous venture in setting up this seminary—you teachers know how much it costs to provide an education and lodging for students—but this is a small sacrifice if we are able to provide priests who minister according to the heart of God. Considering this need for your economic support, we have thought of returning to the custom of dedicating the collection on the third Sunday of the month to this work. On the third Sunday of each month a collection will be taken in all the parishes. We will also accept donations of food and other materials which can be given to your pastors who will deliver them to the seminaries. So, on the third Sundays we will be beggars for the seminary so that everyone can make some contribution, and we ask each pastor to remember this collaboration which the people of God will no doubt generously give.

With regard to religious life, I want to congratulate the Carmelite Sisters of San José for their profession of vows and especially for the abundance of vocations they have. When the young women are asked what attracts them to this congregation, they give a wonderful testimony. They say it is the simplicity of life, the unity, and the love that the sisters show to one another; they are especially impressed by the generous service the sisters give to the parishes and the community centers. Thanks be to God, not only the Carmelites but several other congregations are also serving our people in this direct pastoral work. Without a doubt God will reward them with many vocations. This week the Guadalupana Sisters are going to celebrate the centenary of their founding. We congratulate them and commend them to the Lord. The Carmelite Missionaries, who serve in the Divina Providencia Hospital, invite everyone to their chapel at 6:00 o'clock tomorrow afternoon for a Mass of thanksgiving to celebrate the twelve years of their service in this hospital which is truly a work of Divine Providence. It is a miraculous work, and anyone who wants palpable evidence of God's providence should visit there and assist in that ministry, especially tomorrow when they celebrate their anniversary.

I visited the communities of San Antonio in Santa Tecla, where a faithful servant of the church gives us an example of perseverance. Monsignor Alvarenga is almost one hundred years old, and he continues to minister faithfully in this parish established and administered by himself. I also visited the house of the Good Shepherd, where there has been a change of superior; one observes there a generous spirit of love toward the young people who are given shelter. I also visited Aldeíta, a village of Tejutla; the faithful there, together with the people of El Paraíso, are going to establish a new parish. The Bethlehemite Sisters and Father Gabriel

Rodríguez are engaged in a wonderful apostolate in that region. I also had the pleasure of making the Esquipulas pilgrimage to the sanctuary of Santa Cruz Michapa, where Father Ayala and his very enthusiastic committee are working on behalf of the people there. This Sunday the people of El Calvario are celebrating their patronal feast, the Lord of Calvary. There is a beautiful crucifix in this community, an image that goes back to the founding of the city of San Salvador.

Dear sisters and brothers, I rejoice above all and want to give thanks to the Lord for the week of prayer for Christian unity, which ended with great fervor last Wednesday in the cathedral. Some people were unable to attend, but they offered to the Lord their infirmities, their pain, and their absence; they are certainly generous benefactors of this work of unity. Father Cortés sent us this wonderful telegram: «From my sickbed I participated in the unity week and offered up my suffering. I congratulate you for a celebration never seen here before».

Truly, sisters and brothers, the Lord has blessed us with this idea that has been embraced by Catholics and Protestants of good will. They realize that as long as we fail to achieve this unity that Christ desires, we will be a hindrance to the evangelization of the world. But on the day when the unity of all who believe in the Gospel of Christ is manifest to the whole world, that unity will then become the most eloquent call to Christianity. Everyone will become Christian on the day when we Christians affirm our unity. Accordingly, even though the week of unity has ended, I ask you to continue to keep this intention in your prayers, to offer sacrifices, and make an effort to come together with our Protestant and Orthodox sisters and brothers—even though there are not many Orthodox among us. Above all, let us all seek unity within our own church.

In view of this, sisters and brothers, the sense of today's homily could be this: «The Church of the Beatitudes». Dominant in today's Liturgy of the Word is this precious passage of Saint Matthew: the Beatitudes. These eight norms were given by Christ himself to help us know whether a person is truly Christian or only appears to be so. To understand better the sublime mystery contained in them, we should keep in mind the whole liturgical framework of today's readings. We'll go back to the first reading, taken from a prophet of the Old Testament named Zephaniah, and then we'll see how these words of Christ become reality in the primitive Christian communities; this is narrated for us today in the second reading from Saint Paul's letter to the community of Corinth. In this way we will understand the depths of the Divine Teacher's invitation.

But I tell you beforehand that we still do not understand all the greatness of the Beatitudes because, since Christ pronounced them, a moral revolution has been unleashed on the world, and it has not yet reached its climax. Since we are still involved in this process, we will not fully understand it until the goal of this revolution becomes reality as the kingdom of heaven promised as a reward in each of the Beatitudes. They are eight roads that are open to humanity, and we must walk on them with faith. In order to understand this church of the Beatitudes, I want to propose, as is my custom, three ideas. All three are taken from the Old Testament but become incarnate in the New. The first idea is that the remnant of Israel is prolonged in the church. The second idea is what Zephaniah says about the Day of the Lord, which opens up for us Christian hope and eschatological perspectives. And the third idea is that Christ is the strength of this church that journeys as a pilgrim in faith and hope. These are three thoughts from today's readings.

The remnant of Israel is prolonged in the church

The «remnant of Israel» is the way the prophets described the small group of faithful Jews who remained true to the promise and followed God's ways. God called the people of the Old Testament to enter into a covenant with him, but this people had a propensity for idolatry and materialism; they desired the easy life of earth and forgot about God. Yet there always remained a remnant, a faithful few to whom the prophets addressed their words. To help this remnant of Israel, the prophets denounced all the abuses, all the injustices, and all the greediness of unfaithful Israel. That is why I tell you, sisters and brothers, that it is necessary to read the Bible while keeping in mind the circumstances in which we live today. Saint Paul compared his Christian community in Corinth with this faithful remnant of Israel. He understands that this group of people faithful to Christ will have to experience in their own history the same vicissitudes as the remnant of Israel.

It is good to read the Old Testament, especially the prophets, and to hear the severe reprimands and the calls for order that the prophets made. The prophets addressed even the kings, the government officials, the rich, all those who abused and trampled on the people. And they told them, «You are the reason that God has broken his alliance with this people». They called them to repentance: «Be converted and renewed!» This cry continues in the church, this call for people to be faithful to Christ. Fragile people, as we all are, will not always respond to this call to holiness. We create idols of money, power, and other earthly things. Still we are called: «Be converted! Be faithful to your baptism! Be faithful to your Lord!»

This is the remnant of Israel that Zephaniah refers to after describing the terrible injustices of those times, caused by the pride and extravagant wealth of the powerful. The prophet announces God's promise: «I will leave as a remnant in your midst a people humble and lowly» (Zeph 3:12). This is Zephaniah's word for us today, and this is what the church desires: a humble people who follow Christ, a remnant. My sisters and brothers, we should not become excited about great crowds of people; rather, we should be concerned about the authenticity and the quality of Christians and their sincerity in seeking Christ.

I am therefore happy that, during these times when it is difficult to be faithful to Christ, there are many good Christians among every kind of people in the archdiocese, in the city, and in the rural areas. Here it is known who is faithful and who belongs to this faithful remnant. May my call, in the name of Jesus Christ, touch people's hearts. Let us desire not so much to be sinless or angelic, for we are all sinners and have evil tendencies, but let us make an effort to be authentic and to confess our sins. Let us never be content to enthrone sin in the world; let us struggle to overcome sin and root out selfishness, pride, and vanity. The remnant of Israel refuses to be content with people's mediocrity; they desire to be a poor and humble people. We will explain the meaning of these words.

But first, sisters and brothers, I want to read to you a passage from the encyclical *Populorum Progressio* so that you can see what the pope describes as the destructive spirit of avarice, which goes against the spirit of poverty: «The pursuit of life's necessities is quite legitimate. . . . But the acquisition of worldly goods can lead men to greed, to the unrelenting desire for more, to the pursuit of greater personal power. Rich and poor alike—be they individuals, families or nations—can fall prey to avarice and soul-stifling materialism» (PP 18). Let us keep this in mind, sisters and brothers: the spirit of avarice can also exist in those who are called poor but are not really poor because their hearts are infected with avarice. Thus,

dispossessed class can create victims just as the wealthy class can; both classes can be afflicted with a «suffocating materialism».

The pope continues: «Neither individuals nor nations should regard the possession of more and more goods as the ultimate objective. Every kind of progress is a two-edged sword. It is necessary if man is to grow as a human being; yet it can also enslave him, if he comes to regard it as the supreme good and cannot look beyond it». The consequences of this are the following: «Men harden their hearts, shut out others from their minds and gather together solely for reasons of self-interest rather than out of friendship; dissension and disunity follow soon after. Thus the exclusive pursuit of material possessions prevents man's growth as a human being and stands in opposition to his true grandeur». And the pope concludes with this incisive phrase: «Avarice in individuals and in nations is the most obvious form of stultified moral development» (PP 19). In other words nations and individuals are not underdeveloped simply because they lack material goods; they can also be morally underdeveloped when they have every comfort and yet have the spirit of avarice.

The Day of the Lord opens up for us Christian hope and eschatological perspectives

My second thought, then, sisters and brothers, introduces us to the Beatitudes. This beautiful passage that dominates today's Liturgy of the Word should be the object of our reflection during the whole week. «Blessed are the poor in spirit, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven» (Matt 5:3). Saint Matthew adds the words «in spirit», but originally this phrase read simply, «blessed are the poor». Saint Luke does not add «in spirit» (Luke 6:20), and when the prophet Isaiah announced that Christ would proclaim the Gospel, he says simply «to the poor» (Isa 61:1). When the Gospel of Matthew was being written in that Jewish or Greco-Roman world, there were, like today, many poor people (Luke 4:18).

We should not be afraid, then, to say that this Beatitude refers to poor people, but not just to any poor people, as the pope has just said, for there are poor people with a spirit of avarice. This beatitude refers to all who have made poverty part of their ethic. The poor are those who do not view themselves as self-sufficient; they may even run the risk of becoming servile because psychologically they have a feeling of powerlessness and insecurity. It is this psychological insecurity of the poor that Christ wants to use in order to open them up to hope in God, who possesses all and for whom nothing is impossible.

Blessed are those, then, who take advantage of their poverty to open themselves to hope. This passage opens us to hope in the midst of tribulations, but not to preach conformity; the church is never conformist! Rather, she tells people, as the pope has told us, that the struggle here on this earth should not have as its goal the greedy desire to possess. That simply depersonalizes people and leaves them morally underdeveloped. Instead, people should work and struggle for the welfare of themselves and their families. Their hearts must be open to hope, and their love must be open to the service of others.

«Blessed are the meek», Jesus says, «for they will inherit the land» (Matt 5:4). We can almost hear in these words of Jesus an echo of God promising Abraham a new land, a land of hope, a new heaven, a new earth (Gen 12:1). This land of justice and love that Christians hope for is not found here in this world, but this world ought to reflect this justice and love. The full reality lies beyond history and will be our destiny.

«Blessed are those who mourn» (Matt 5:5). They mourn because they do not have the earthly joys that others have. They mourn because they see people's sins and ask for God's forgiveness. Blessed are those who mourn with these noble feelings because they will receive the greatest of comforts: they will see that God forgives his people, and they will understand that there are joys that do not belong to this earth.

«Blessed are those who hunger and thirst for justice» (Matt 5:6). Justice in the biblical sense means a good relationship between God and humankind. It also means God's victory over human evil. The truly just want to maintain their relationship with God so that it is not corrupted by earthly sin. The truly just are grieved that so many people lack a good relationship with God because they have divinized something that is not really the true God. Blessed are those who desire the justice by which God will triumph over the evil of humankind, «for they will be satisfied» (Matt 5:6). They will be filled with joy, and their hunger will be satisfied.

«Blessed are the merciful, for they will receive mercy» (Matt 5:7). This is one of the most profound biblical desires. Humans are not made for vengeance, for hatred, for violence, but for reconciliation, for love, for forgiveness. We will be forgiven in the measure that we forgive. That is what we tell God: «Forgive us as we forgive» (Luke 11:4). Blessed are the merciful and generous hearts that are instruments of peace and that sow harmony where there is discord (Matt 5:8).

«Blessed are the clean of heart». The gospel here refers to the sincerity that caused conflict between Jesus and the Pharisees. The Pharisees were concerned only about an exterior, ritualistic, legalistic purity. For them, being clean consisted in washing hands and performing certain external purifications. Jesus called them hypocrites. «What good is it to clean the outside of the plate if inside it is dirty? What good is it to have the outside of the tomb nicely painted if inside it is filled with rottenness?» (Matt 23:25-28). Clean of heart refers to those who sincerely cleanse their hearts, because «one is not made unclean by the things that enter the stomach or by eating with unclean hands, but rather one is made unclean by the things that come forth from the heart: evil thoughts and desires and avarice. These are the things that make a person unclean» (Matt 15:17-20). This, then, is a call to sincerity.

«Blessed are the peacemakers, for they shall be called children of God» (Matt 5:9). My sisters and brothers, this is a time when God wants his many children to work on behalf of peace and not violence. He wants us to make peace not just a facade but a true work of justice and love.

And finally, «Blessed are those who are persecuted for the sake of justice, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven» (Matt 5:10). No doubt Saint Matthew was feeling the murmuring, the criticism, and the persecution of the Jewish people against the Christians. Persecution has been the inheritance of the church down through the centuries, but now it is the time to say that those who suffer this persecution are blessed.

Christ is the strength of this church that journeys as a pilgrim in faith and hope

Finally, dear sisters and brothers, I present my third thought which I hope will be a synthesis of all that I have said: Christ is the strength of the church. That is why Saint Paul in writing to the Corinthians seeks to respond to the cause of the divisions in Corinth. The divisions came about

because the Christians were focusing on the wisdom of this world: some were for Apollo, the great preacher; others were for Cephas; still others were for Paul (1 Cor 1:12). They were considering only the eloquence of these men. Saint Paul told the people to look at themselves: «Look at those who are gathered here; in the eyes of the world not many of us are people of prestige—we are poor» (1 Cor 1:26-27). Paul already had the experience of preaching in the Areopagus to the sages of Greece, and he had preached to the Jews (Acts 17:22), but he was despised, stoned, and persecuted by both groups. In contrast, here on the shores of the port of Corinth, he was with simple, gentle people, the ones Zephaniah called «a humble and lowly people» (Zeph 3:12), the people whom God chooses. Paul says that «God has chosen the lowly and the despised of the world, those who count for nothing so that no human being might boast before God. It is due to him that you are in Christ Jesus, who became for us wisdom from God, as well as righteousness, sanctification, and redemption» (1 Cor 1:27-30).

In other words, sisters and brothers, the great blessings that Christians hope for should not be the things desired by people we call «prestigious». If those people want to possess more wealth and to move up politically, socially, or economically, that should be of no interest to Christians. That is why Christians don't place their hope in getting along with the powers of the earth. The authentic church makes her own weakness and poverty dependent on the wealth she hopes for, which is the wisdom, justice, sanctification, and redemption of Christ. What more do I want? I want everyone to follow this Christ and to feel that Christ is the true greatness and the true support of our church.

There are some Christians among us, sisters and brothers, who see the archdiocese as a failure, as being at an impasse: «What is going to happen now?», they ask. But those who have faith in Christ and find their support in Christ are good Christians. If this church of the archdiocese relies on Christ and hopes in his wisdom and his redemption, then she is not at an impasse but is building herself up. We are working together in solidarity.

My sisters and brothers, I would like today's reading from Saint Paul to convince us that we have no need to hope for anything else if we have Christ as the foundation on which we build the church. We should not expect different circumstances. If they come, as Mr. Todman said, they will be for the good of the people, but meanwhile the church is doing her best to present Christ to the world and to urge Christians to support themselves on this rock, to believe in this truth, to cling to this wisdom. This is the wealth of those whose hearts are humble and poor. They do not seek their happiness in the transitory things left behind at death and carried off by time; their happiness is found in the wisdom, the justice, the sanctification, and the redemption of Christ. Blessed are the poor for they know that their riches are in him who was rich but made himself poor in order to enrich us with his poverty and to teach us true Christian wisdom (2 Cor 8:9).

As I said at the beginning, dear sisters and brothers, we cannot fully understand the meaning of the Beatitudes. That is why there are many, especially among the young, who do not believe that the love of the Beatitudes is going to bring about a better world, and so they opt for violence, for guerrilla war, for revolution.

The church will never take that path. Let this be perfectly clear. The church does not choose those paths of violence, and everything said to that effect is slander. The church's option is for what Christ says here in the Beatitudes. I am not surprised that people fail to understand; young people especially are impatient and want a better world. But Christ, who

preached this message twenty centuries ago, knew that he was sowing a long-term moral revolution which will take effect to the extent that we human beings are converted from our worldly way of thinking.

Revolution means overthrowing an order, subverting the moral order that generally prevails in the world. The world does not say, «Blessed are the poor». The world says, «Blessed are the rich because you are worth as much as you possess». But Christ says, «That's a lie! Blessed are the poor for theirs is the kingdom of heaven (Matt 5:3) because they do not put their trust in what is transitory».

Thus all the Beatitudes subvert what the world believes in, and they sow the seed of a transformation that we will not see finished until the kingdom of heaven, the goal Christ points out to us as the infinite horizon, becomes reality. Blessed are those who keep moving forward even though they think they are walking in darkness and the road leads nowhere. Let us continue on the way, for it is the way of Christ, and we will arrive at the goal that today's readings point out to us as hope and vision. Let us proclaim, then, our faith in these truths of Christ.