

Chaplain's Bulletin January 29, 2023



Dear Folks,

Our Gospel today is the Beatitudes, the beginning of the Sermon on the Mount. This opens Jesus' public teaching in the Gospel of Matthew and sets the stage for what follows.

To appreciate how the Sermon on the Mount is presented in Matthew, we need to talk about the Torah, which is the term the Israelites use for the first five books of the Bible. The word is usually translated “law”, but a rabbi told me that didn’t convey the meaning well. He said, “Sin is missing the target, and Torah means hitting the target. However, when you go through the Bible and see references to “statutes”, “ordinances” or “decrees” they are talking about the Torah. Psalm 1 and Psalm 119 are both hymns in honor of the Torah and say that it is the way to true blessedness. The Torah was the foundation of the nation of Israel and their relationship with God. Being in right relationship with God came from doing the works of the law of Moses, the Torah. To this day, Jewish people revere the Torah and treat Torah scrolls with great reverence. They are kept in a cabinet called an “ark” (think ark of the covenant, not Noah’s ark), and taken out and carried in procession when read in prayer services.

Exodus 20 is a classic presentation of the giving of a new Torah. Moses goes up a mountain to receive it from God. It begins with the 10 Commandments (the pocket-sized version) and then expands on them. In the Sermon on the Mount, Jesus goes up the mountain. He starts with the Beatitudes, the pocket-sized version, and then expands on them.

We, of course, would not call the Sermon on the Mount the new Torah. We would say that Jesus himself is the new Torah. Pope Benedict makes this point in his “Jesus of Nazareth” book when referring to another mountaintop experience where Jesus is transfigured, and the Father speaks from a cloud and says, “This is my beloved Son, with whom I am well pleased; listen to him (Matthew 17:5).” St. Paul will argue extensively, especially in Romans and Galatians, that for Christians, being in right relationship with God is no longer works of the law of Moses, but about faithfulness to Jesus.

From now until Lent, we will take our Sunday Gospel readings from the Sermon on the Mount. I would challenge everyone to read Psalm 1, and then read Matthew chapters 5-7, and maybe even spend some time wrestling with them. As we go through the Gospel of Matthew this year, it would be useful to look for echoes from this sermon in Jesus’ teaching throughout the Gospel. I suggest that if people reflect on it from time to time, they could find deeper insights on different parts of their Christian journey. A key concept to keep in mind is that this is not just a list of rules, of things to do and things not to do but a vision of total transformation, changing us to the core. The process is not done until we are fully perfected at the end of our journey (Mat 5:48).

Blessings, Fr. Jim