

The Congregation of Saint Athanasius  
A sermon preached by Father Bradford on Septuagesima Sunday  
February 17, 2019

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When the Incarnation happened, it was not a courtesy call. Our Lord Jesus had a mission entrusted to Him by His Heavenly Father. And the time arrived when Jesus gave His disciples some idea of the message they would be hearing and asked to accept. So, on a nice day the Lord selected a hillside and gathered a large crowd of (mostly) supporters, and told them what it would mean to follow Him. Following Christ means more than carrying a membership card in your wallet! It means accepting a new way of life, adopting new proportions and values. In many ways these new values would run counter to conventional wisdom and practice.

Right off the bat, the opening beatitude is a case in point. “Blessed are those of you who are poor” (Luke 6:20) has lost its shock value because after 2000 years we know at least *something* about the virtues of “holy poverty.” But think of the Jewish audience on that Palestine hillside in the 1<sup>st</sup> Century who were hearing the Beatitudes for the first time. To them such a remark was ridiculous and absurd. To them and their ancestors *wealth* was the sign of God’s blessing. Poverty showed divine disapproval. Our Lord saw it differently. *Anything* that could get in the way of our relationship and total dependence upon Our Heavenly Father was a barrier to entering the Kingdom. This was not a tirade against having a bank account. It wasn’t money but the *love* of money that was the danger. It would be necessary to be poor in spirit in order to gain Heaven, and if money was the barrier then get rid of it. In this and in so many ways Jesus completely reversed normal standards. Of course, this means the people had forgotten the ancient Scriptures: “Your ways are not my ways” says the Lord. (Isaiah 55:8) The Lord Jesus was not preaching revolution. But it was perceived that way. And the Christians at Thessalonica were described as “these that have turned the world *upside down*.” (Acts 17:6)

Jesus is the Good Shepherd. But do not forget He is also a hardheaded and practical teacher of morality. *Hardheaded* means the Lord never compromised divine law. When the crowd melted in opposition to His teaching, Jesus turned to His twelve chosen apostles and said, “Will ye also go away?” Yet the Lord was *practical*. The Beatitudes set a high bar. But Jesus never operated from the assumption we could not keep God’s law. He never indicated Almighty God made bizarre demands labeled “religious” yet impossible to keep.

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Everything was eminently practical and reasonable. This was revealed both in Creation and by the Incarnation. A human being is capable of doing right. Because he is the child of God the human person *has* to do right. If he doesn't, he is not whole; he is not at ease. He is in *dis*-ease. And the pharmaceutical companies and your neighborhood *cannabis* store can do nothing about it! His problems are due to his rebellion and the temptation to live totally for himself. All of this is contrary to man's design by his Creator. If he persists in rebellion and living only for himself, the full enjoyment of life as God has created it will escape him. Our Blessed Lord said "I have come that ye may have life, and have it more abundantly." This means the abundant and full life is something we cannot have without Him.

The human task is to affirm the created order in a world all too ready to deny it. To live without God and His commandments is living inhumanly, and, really, *sub*-humanly. Jesus had parables about that condition. He said "Once there was a judge who cared neither for God or man." There were people like that in 1<sup>st</sup> century Palestine and you don't need me to tell you there are people like that today.

To follow Jesus Christ does not mean business as usual with a few higher standards tacked on! It means to enter a new life, one that makes continuing to exist in the old world both hard and *dangerous*. But that is what Christ put on offer on the Galilean hillside: a life totally conditioned by our faith and our confidence in God and in His good purpose.