

In our first reading from the Book of the Prophet, Zephaniah, we read:

*"Seek the Lord, all you humble of the earth, who have observed His Law; seek justice, seek humility... I shall leave as a remnant in your midst a people humble and lowly, who shall take refuge in the name of the Lord."*  
(Zephaniah 2. 3; 3. 12)

Though not an essential point to understanding this particular text at the moment, it should be remembered that Zephaniah addresses a people who are *divided*: the Prophet Zephaniah speaks to the people of Judah, that is, the Southern Kingdom of Palestine, in the years of the reign of King Josiah, c. 640-609 B.C. The Kingdom of Saul, of David and Solomon had fallen apart because of sin – not only the sins of the Kings themselves, but because of the sins of its people around the year 930 B.C., into two Kingdoms, the Kingdom of the South, that is, Judah, and the Kingdom of the North, that is, Israel. All of the people of both Kingdoms suffered because of this division, and, a great part of that suffering, was the realization that they had, in their sinfulness, broken the very heart of their Father-God, hence all that was left to them was sorrow and brokenness. In other words, to the Jewish people of that day even to the present, sin was not simply a *personal affair*, but, indeed, sin reached out to entail global dimensions, because it was the *sinfulness of their actions as a people* that split the nation into two nations – a thing abhorrent to God, and, also, split the people of God from the very Lord, Himself. In light of this understanding, we can then see much more 'material,' as it were, in the words of the Prophet, written above.

Thus, as the Prophet Zephaniah says, we are called to *"seek justice, seek humility."* And we are promised that, no matter what happens, the Lord will leave a *"remnant in our midst..."* What is a 'remnant?' The idea of a 'remnant of the people' is an ancient concept which holds that, after a deep purification, a *Day of Judgment* if you will, not only for God's holy people but for all the nations, a warning, a *Day* will come which will lead mankind "back to repentance, obedience and humility that they so sadly lack and only by which can they survive divine visitation. A "remnant," however, will be left to enjoy the fruits of salvation." (1)

Let you think this is too fantastic a thought, not only is this idea consistent throughout the Sacred Scripture, our Church is very familiar in the lives of Her saints and visionaries with this idea, as well. If one studies, for instance, the messages of Ste. Catherine Labouré, (+ 1876) through whom Our Lady gave us the Miraculous Medal with the lovely prayer, *"O Mary, conceived without sin, pray for us who have recourse to Thee!"* one will be amazed at the messages given to the world about the need of purification. Also, nearly about the same time in France, one can study the messages of Our Lady of LaSalette. Nearer to our own time, and amazing in their detail, the messages of Our Divine Lord to St. Faustina Kowalska (+ 1938):

"Today I heard the words: **In the Old Covenant I sent prophets wielding thunderbolts to My people. Today I am sending you with My mercy to the people of the whole world. I do not want to punish mankind, but I desire to heal it, pressing it to My Merciful Heart. I use punishment when they themselves force Me to do so; My hand is reluctant to take hold of the sword of justice. Before**

**the Day of Justice I am sending the Day of Mercy.** I replied, 'O my Jesus, speak to souls Yourself, because my words are insignificant.'" (2)

Jesus goes on to explain to St. Faustina in another place: "God's floodgates have been opened for us. Let us want to take advantage of them before the day of God's justice arrives. And that will be a dreadful day!" (3) Yes, our God *is* the God of Mercy – we need only fear His justice if we do not come to His Mercy. But I beg and implore you, as one who has been a student of theology, world and Church history, and, also, prophecy of the Saints, that the words of Jesus need to be heeded, not only His words regarding mercy, but also His words about judgment.

In the days when Our Divine Lord walked the earth, the men of knowledge, both the Sadducees and the Pharisees mocked Jesus. They knew all of the minutiae of the Law, and probably much of the modern learning of the day, as well. *But could they read the signs of the times?* They were very good at testing the Lord and asking Him for signs. One day, no doubt fed up with their pride and pretences, He told them:

*"If you know how to interpret the look of the sky, can you not read the signs of the times? An evil, faithless age is eager for a sign, but no sign will be given except that of Jonah." With that, He left them abruptly.*" (St. Matthew 16. 3-4)

In today's Holy Mass, as we move through the readings from the Prophet Zephaniah, through Psalm 146 and St. Paul's first letter to the Corinthians, where again (though in rather veiled language) we are reminded of *purification*, even, perhaps, a *Day of Judgment*: *"God chose the lowly and despised of the world, those who count for nothing, to reduce to nothing those who are something..."* (1 Corinthians 1. 27) You are asking yourselves: how do these words imply a judgment? Think! For those who are haughty, who look down upon all those around themselves, when they see Jesus and say:

*"When did we see Thee hungry, Lord, or thirsty, or away from home or naked or ill or in prison and not attend Thee in Thy needs? And Jesus will say unto them: 'I assure you: as often as you neglected to do it to one of these least ones, you did not do it unto Me!'"* (St. Matthew 26. 44-45)

The Gospel of today, the Beatitudes in the Gospel of St. Matthew offers us an insight about how we can be purified, and, as the name of this Gospel suggests, also 'blessed!' This Gospel begins with Jesus on the Mountain of the Beatitudes, probably not far from the Lake (or Sea) of Galilee. To a Jewish man or woman at the time of Jesus, any teacher teaching on a mountain would bring to the mind of a good Hebrew one thing and one thing only – this is an image of *the great Teacher of Israel, Moses*. *"... and after He had sat down..."* Jesus' sitting down is an unmistakable sign of authority. Unlike today, where a teacher might sit, stand, pace or do any number of things (posture being a rather indifferent sort of affair these days), in the time of Christ, the posture of being seated was a sign that only great teachers assumed. This would not have been lost on the crowd.

Our Holy Father, Pope Benedict, in his new book, *Jesus of Nazareth*, makes a very interesting point about the posture of Jesus in relationship to the Mountain which has become his *cathedra*, or throne of teaching:

“Jesus sits down – the expression of the plenary authority of the teacher. He takes His seat on the cathedra of the mountain. Later on He will speak of the rabbis who sit in the cathedra – the chair – of Moses and so have authority (cf. Mt 23.2); for that reason their teaching must be listened to and accepted, even though their lives contradict it, even though they themselves are not authority, but receive authority from another... Jesus sits on the cathedra of Moses. But He does so not after the manner of teachers who are trained for the job in a school; He sits there as the greater Moses, Who broadens the Covenant to include all nations. This also explains the significance of the mountain. The Evangelist does not tell us which of the hills of Galilee it was. But the very fact that it is the scene of Jesus’ preaching makes it simply ‘the mountain’ – the new Sinai... The ‘mountain,’ then, is by the very nature of the case established as the new and definitive Sinai.” (4)

*colt, the foal of an ass.” (Zechariah 9. 9-10)*

When Jesus enters Jerusalem, riding on a donkey amid cheers and palms, what do the people shout? *“Fear not, O daughter Zion! Your King approaches you riding on an ass, on a colt, the foal of an ass.” (St. John 12. 15)* And the ancient prophecy from Zechariah continues: *“He will cut off the chariot from Ephraim... the battle bow shall be cut off, and he shall command peace to the nations; his dominion shall be from sea to sea, and from the River to the ends of the earth.” (6)* The Holy Father explains: *“This passage announces a poor king – a king whose rule does not depend on political and military might. His inmost being is humility and meekness before God and men. ... And a vivid illustration is the fact that he rides on an ass – the mount of the poor, the counter-image of the chariot that he rejects. He is the king of peace – and by God’s power, not his own.” (7)*

*“Blessed are they who are persecuted for the sake of righteousness... blessed are they when they insult you and persecute you and utter every kind of evil against you falsely because of Me. Rejoice and be glad, for your reward will be great in Heaven!” (St. Matthew 5. 11-12)*

The ministry of the Lord, Whose Kingdom *“is not of this world,” (see St. John 18. 36)* will consist of giving the blind their sight, allowing the cripples to walk once again, bringing back hearing to those who are deaf, curing the lepers, raising the dead; in short, as Jesus said to the ambassadors of St. John the Baptist: *“... the poor have the good news preached to them. Blest is the man who finds no stumbling block in Me!” (St. Matthew 11. 4-6)*

What shall we use this time of Lent for? The amazing thing that we learn, if we pause to study deeply the Beatitudes, is that in Jesus, we have made a “decisive turning point in the history of mysticism.” (8) To use the words of Pope Benedict:

*“... God descends, to the point of death on the Cross. And precisely by doing so, He reveals Himself in His true divinity. We ascend to God by accompanying Him on this descending path... The pure heart is the loving heart that enters into communion of service and obedience with Jesus Christ. Love is the fire that purifies and unifies intellect, will and emotion, thereby making man one with Himself; inasmuch as it makes him one in God’s eyes.” (9)*

An old truism says: *“There is none so blind as him who will not see.”* This Lent, perhaps we could be like the blind Bartimaeus, who, on hearing the approach of the Lord, cried out, *“Lord, that I may see!” (St. Luke 18. 41)* Lord, You have descended from Your Mount of teaching; You remain with us on our altars and in our Tabernacles; what is it that prevents us from ascending to You? Open our eyes and ears and hearts, remove the mountains of our pride, and bring us to the Mount of Transfiguration where You will place Your sigh of love upon us, to remake, renew and transform our lives, our hearts, our very beings. Teach us true Beatitude of heart! Teach us the blessedness of Your Cross. Bring us through a Lenten tide of love to an Eastertide of Your joy! *“Lord, that we may see!”*

While mountains may be a source of beauty and majesty to us today, I think I am safe in saying that mountains are not a part of our religious imagery. Suffice it to say, what a bishop and a shamrock is to an Irishman on St. Patrick’s Day, the sight of Jesus seated on the Mount, teaching to the Jewish people of old was Moses had come back to them in the flesh!

And the message of Beatitude that Christ gives on this Mount? In a religious world then dominated by the Pharisees with six hundred forty-three precepts, two hundred forty-eight of which are commandments (thou shalt!) and three hundred sixty-five of which are prohibitions (thou shalt not!), Jesus will speak these nine beatitudes. Later on, He will daringly simplify His teaching even more, to two commandments:

*“Jesus replied: ‘This is the first [commandment]: Hear, O Israel, the Lord, our God, is Lord alone! Therefore, you shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, with all your soul, with all your mind, and with all your strength. The second is like unto it: You shall love your neighbour as yourself! There is no commandment greater than these!’” (St. Mark 12. 29-31)*

Of course, there is no conflict between the Beatitudes and the two ‘great commandments.’ Rather, the Beatitudes and the ‘great commandments’ act like mirrors, or perhaps we might better say, facets of a diamond, each reflecting off the other, showing us the splendour and mercy of our God.

Since space does not permit us to go into a detailed analysis of each Beatitude, can we peer into the essence of the Beatitudes Christ has given us? Again, our Holy Father, Benedict, in his new book, *Jesus of Nazareth*, gives us some unique insights. “Anyone,” says the Holy Father, “who reads Matthew’s text attentively will realize that the Beatitudes present a sort of veiled interior biography of Jesus, a kind of portrait of his figure.” (5) I am so grateful to His Holiness; in all my years of study and prayer, that was something I missed!

Look! *“Blessed are the poor in spirit!”* Jesus came to us in utter poverty, and will die that way as well; even His clothing will be stripped from Him to fulfill the ancient prophecies: *“They divided my garments among them; and for my vesture they cast lots.” (Psalm 22. 19, St. John 19. 24)*

*“Blessed are the meek... blessed are the merciful...”* The Holy Father, in his treatment regarding the meekness of Jesus, makes an astonishing discovery, linking this passage: *“Blessed are the meek,” (St. Matthew 5. 5)* with the passage of prophecy that occurs when Jesus enter Jerusalem the Sunday before His death, that is, Palm Sunday. The full prophecy is recorded in the Book of Zechariah, which reads:

*“Rejoice greatly, O daughter Zion! ... Lo, your King comes to you... meek and riding on an ass, on a*