



The Inclusive Community

Fourth Sunday After Epiphany

January 30, 2011

Matthew 5: 1-12

Theme: Beatitudes

Homily of Rev. Dr. Anthony T. Padovano

John F. Kennedy was inaugurated president of the United States some fifty years ago. He replaced Dwight Eisenhower, the oldest president we had ever had. Kennedy was the youngest president we had ever elected. One can see in films of that event, the passage from an older generation to a new generation. Kennedy was the first president born in the twentieth century.

He was a mythic figure: elegant, handsome, articulate, intelligent, a world citizen, a Pulitzer-Prize author, the heir of a legendary family tradition. He gave one of the best inaugural addresses delivered in American history. He was surrounded by two younger brothers, Robert and Edward, destined in their own right to become legends. People spoke of Kennedy as bringing us Camelot, utopia. He put Americans on the moon and he began the process that would end the long, cold war with the Soviet Union, in American victory. He was the stuff of which legends and dreams are made.

His assassination after a tenure of just a few years was one of the saddest days in American history. Of the four American presidents assassinated, Lincoln and Kennedy were the ones whose deaths crippled the nation with grief. Lincoln's death, on Good Friday, was filled with the imagery of Christ. Kennedy's death was enveloped in Pentecostal imagery, with an eternal flame over his grave and a sense that he brought the nation a new spirit and a new birth of freedom. The fact that Lincoln was a Republican and Kennedy a Democrat did not register. They were beyond politics in the national memory of them – one freed the slaves and saved the Union; the other

became the herald of a nation that would lift us from the earth literally and lead America to dominate space and the new worlds we would inhabit there.

In spite of all this, no one claimed for Kennedy anything more than what a human being is. No one said he was divine or without sin. No one asserted that he was someone who, perhaps, could overcome death or that he was a model we all should follow.

Fifty years is not a long time. Millions knew and remembered Kennedy. They would not allow, for all our enthusiasm for him and grief at his loss, they would not allow him to be portrayed in superhuman terms. He was an immensely talented and yet very limited human being.

Matthew writes his Gospel some fifty years after the execution of Jesus. Jesus is killed as a young prophet, a charismatic, articulate, creative human being. When Matthew writes, there are many people who knew Jesus of Nazareth, heard him and saw his successes and his failures. Not only Matthew but Mark and Luke and John and Paul and Magdalene were contemporaries. They were all creative and intelligent, brilliant writers and critical thinkers. They all agree with the picture of Jesus Matthew gives us in today's Gospel.

Matthew begins this passage by portraying Jesus as a new Moses. He does this in the first sentence of today's reading by telling us Jesus went up a mountain and gave us a new covenant. It was not Sinai but Galilee. But a covenant from God, different from that Moses gave, came to us through Jesus.

Jesus goes up the mountain in the first paragraph of chapter 5 and talks, without interruption, through all of chapters 5,6, and 7. When he descends at the beginning of chapter 8, the first person he meets is a leper. Jesus touches the leper, an unheard of action, a ritual defilement. He touches the leper and cures him.

It is, however, the first twelve verses of chapter five that form the passage for today's liturgy. In a sense, this is Jesus' inaugural address, if you will, as a prophet and as the Messiah. Matthew will present Jesus as starting the world again. Jesus will claim in this speech that he will fulfill all the prophecies. He teaches us, in chapter 6, the "Our Father" and he tells us we must end our anxieties because God will care for us as the lilies of the field and the birds of the air. When Matthew writes this, he knows God did not save Jesus from the cross. He tells us in chapter 7 that the law and the prophets are summed up in treating others as we would have them treat us. We pray the "Our Father" but we find God in our neighbor. He will end chapter 7 with a reference to the fact that he is the Lord and that everyone who builds his or her life on his words will be indestructible, like a house built to last forever on a rock that the floods and the winds cannot destroy.

At the end of this discourse, Matthew has presented Jesus as a divine figure on whom the future of Israel and the fate of the world depends. It is a breath-taking portrayal. It is written after Jesus is executed and buried. It is written in the memory of all those who knew him. It is daring, almost reckless in its assertions. And we who read it today find it credible, as people did in the first century.

Jesus proclaims a new kingdom, a new way of looking at life, a new way of serving God. He will not lead us, as Moses did, to a geographically defined land. He calls for us to build our lives, not in a territory with boundaries but in the midst of the human family. He tells us that the kingdom of God is not made up of people with elegant clothing and stunning palaces and mighty armies and awesome titles. God's spirit does not go there.

This is the kingdom, he says: the poor, the grief-stricken, the gentle, the just, the merciful, the honest, the peace-makers, the victims, the abused. These people are the salt of the earth and the light of the world. A kingdom of this world, political and monarchical, excludes everyone except the royal family. The kingdom of God is made up of those who do the things we all can do: becoming gentle, just, merciful, peace-makers.

Matthew will later have Jesus ascend another mountain, called Calvary. He will die and be buried there. But he will live again and return to us and give us the Spirit and help us to build the kingdom he speaks of in chapter 5.

Fifty years after the execution, these claims are astonishing. Two thousand years later they still shape our lives. No one changed history more. And people knew it immediately after his death. There has been nothing like this in all human history.