

4th Sunday after the Epiphany, Gospel Year A

BLESSED BY THE CURSED ONE

Matthew 5:1-12

Fourth Sunday after the Epiphany

Analysis by Lori A. Cornell

1When Jesus saw the crowds, he went up the mountain; and after he sat down, his disciples came to him. 2Then he began to speak, and taught them, saying:

3"Blessed are the poor in spirit, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven.

4"Blessed are those who mourn, for they will be comforted.

5"Blessed are the meek, for they will inherit the earth.

6"Blessed are those who hunger and thirst for righteousness, for they will be filled.

7"Blessed are the merciful, for they will receive mercy.

8"Blessed are the pure in heart, for they will see God.

9"Blessed are the peacemakers, for they will be called children of God.

10"Blessed are those who are persecuted for righteousness' sake, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven.

11"Blessed are you when people revile you and persecute you and utter all kinds of evil against you falsely on my account.

12Rejoice and be glad, for your reward is great in heaven, for in the same way they persecuted the prophets who were before you."



DIAGNOSIS: Facts

Step 1: Initial Diagnosis (External Problem): Alternative Facts

In January of 2017 Americans were introduced to a new phrase: “alternative facts.” It was one political appointee’s way of saying that the actual facts didn’t paint the image she wanted to promote, so facts be damned. One might think that that is what Jesus is up to here. Poverty of spirit, grief, meekness, and hunger for righteousness are cursed in a world that loves self-satisfaction, emotional numbness, and power—not blessed.

Step 2: Advanced Diagnosis (Internal Problem): Nobody’s Buying It

If the world we live in doesn’t buy that these so-called blessings are actually blessed, what are believers supposed to

do? Close our eyes and believe that the world is different than it appears? Didn't Luther himself say, "A theologian of the cross calls a thing what it is"? And, considering the source of the blessing, Jesus himself, the cursed one "who hung from a tree" (Deut. 21:23), perhaps we shouldn't be surprised at such impractical, upside-down thinking.

Step 3: Final Diagnosis (Eternal Problem): Cursed Is the One Who Doesn't Bless

But what if our failure to see the world as Jesus sees it, is our problem—not Jesus'? What if we are cursed who fail to see the world as Jesus sees it. What if our insistence on seeing the world according to the world's standards is deadly? Then, we are dead.

PROGNOSIS: Set Us Free

Step 4: Initial Prognosis (Eternal Solution):



The Truth that Sets Us Free

Thank God that, for worldly liars like us, the Truth is stronger than our fiction. In fact, the very One whom the world declared

dead and gone, cursed and left hanging on a tree, is actually the Blessed One who comes in the name of the Lord. The open tomb screams this truth. God's insistence that life will prevail defies the fact that the dead stay dead. The world has been turned upside down, and the dead One lives. The cursed One is blessed. And he is the Truth who sets us free.

Step 5: Advanced Prognosis (Internal Solution): Marked with the Cross of Christ Forever

Given this turnabout, we probably shouldn't be surprised when, in order to bless us, in Baptism we are marked with that cursed cross forever. The sign of a curse, the cross, becomes a sign of blessing. And we who wear it, mark ourselves over and over, to remind ourselves—and the world—that when the Blessed One says we are beloved, we are beloved (despite all appearances to the contrary). And when the Blessed One says we are his followers, we follow (despite our former and inevitable future straying). Jesus speaks an alternative fact (imputes righteousness as Luther so cleverly used to say). We are blessed.

Step 6: Final Prognosis (External Solution): Alternative Lives

But what of the blessed and forgotten ones who hunger and thirst for righteousness, and linger in meekness, and try valiantly to make peace? We begin to see them as the very blessed ones that Jesus declares them to be. And seeing them according to Jesus' alternative facts, we begin to live alternative lives—that care about others' grief and meekness. We lobby for those who are persecuted for righteousness sake, and we rejoice that our reward in an alternative world is already, in fact, ours.