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Epiphany IV, Year A
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The Vision of True Peace

Today's gospel lesson begins Jesus' Sermon on the Mount with the familiar opening we call the Beatitudes. In the corporate world, you might call the Beatitudes a vision statement. They show us Jesus' "why," why he has come and what kind of kingdom he is revealing among us.

Before Jesus tells us what to do, he tells us who God blesses. He begins with the poor in spirit, those who mourn, the meek, and those who hunger and thirst for righteousness. Jesus starts by blessing the very ones the world often overlooks or forgets.

A few weeks ago, the church celebrated the feast day of Agnes of Rome, one of those whom Jesus calls blessed. Agnes was a twelve-year-old girl executed by the Roman Empire for refusing to denounce Christ. Her death exposed the cruelty of the empire so clearly that many began to question Pax Romana.

People began to wonder who they had become when they saw that the empire could kill a child in the name of peace. And that question still echoes today: who are we becoming as a people, and who are we becoming in the name of peace?

Rome claimed to offer peace, Pax Romana, but it was a peace maintained by force, control, and intimidation, especially over those with little power or influence. The story of Agnes reveals something true of worldly powers in every age.

Even today, kingdoms of this world will often try to make violence sound justifiable in the name of peace. That is why discernment matters so much for us now. Not everything we hear is true, and not every voice is trustworthy.

Part of being a faithful Christian is learning again how to discern what is forming the way we see the world and what kind of kingdom is shaping our hopes and fears. That is exactly why Jesus gives us the Beatitudes.

They place the vision of God's kingdom alongside the kingdoms of this world to help us remember what is true and which kingdom is truly worthy of our allegiance.

In these few verses, Jesus shows us what life looks like under God's gracious rule. It is a vision that offers clarity in a chaotic world. The world cannot silence this image, no matter how hard it tries.

Sometimes, the harder the world tries to silence that vision, the clearer the kingdom becomes. The darker the world gets, the brighter Christ's light shines.

This is a truth we saw with Agnes, a truth we saw in Selma in 1965, and a truth we are still confronting in our own day.

Ultimately, that truth is summed up in Christ crucified, the sinless one who bore the sin of the world. Even a Roman centurion could not miss the kingdom come when he said, "Surely this man was God's Son."

Some have said that Jesus' coronation takes place not on a throne, but on the cross, revealing a kingdom ruled by mercy rather than domination. God's kingdom does not run on fear, control, or blame.

Jesus begins his sermon by blessing those the world has pushed aside. Blessed are the ones the world does not bless. The Beatitudes reveal the priorities of heaven and force a question upon us: what kingdom has been shaping our hearts and minds?

The kingdoms of this world tell us that life comes through success, security, and strength. But Jesus offers a different vision, one rooted in humility, mercy, and righteousness.

And we need this vision again and again because the world confuses what blessing looks like. It trains us to see the poor as problems, the stranger as a threat, the grieving as inconvenient, the meek as weak, and the merciful as foolish.

The Beatitudes challenge that story. They humanize those the world dehumanizes. They give voice to the voiceless. They remind us that no one is forgotten by God.

Every so often, we encounter someone we cannot ignore: a grieving parent, a frightened child, a hurting neighbor. Not a headline, but a human being made in the image of God.

The Beatitudes remind us that this person is seen by the Lord of heaven and earth. Blessed are those who mourn. Blessed are the meek. Blessed are the merciful.

Because in a world that often looks nothing like God's kingdom, our vision becomes distorted. We start to call cruelty normal and forget what blessing truly is.

The Beatitudes help us remember who we are and whose we are. They keep telling the truth when the world tells lies.

This is also what our life together here at Ascension is about. Our ministry is not about building our own little kingdom. It is about modeling the kingdom of heaven.

Through worship and prayer, through service and friendship, through mercy and hospitality, God gives us and our neighbors a glimpse of that kingdom.

We do this imperfectly. We fail and fall short. But the Holy Spirit takes what is ordinary and fragile and makes it holy.

At Jesus' baptism, the Father declares, "You are my Son, the beloved." And in baptism, that blessing is spoken over us as well.

In a world where blessing must be earned, Jesus invites us into a kingdom where blessing is given, where we begin from grace.

Because we begin from grace, we are free to ask what these images mean for us. It does not mean we must fix every crisis. God is already at work in Christ, reconciling and restoring what we cannot.

But it does mean our deepest allegiance belongs to another kingdom.

The Beatitudes invite us to let Jesus reshape who we call blessed, even if that means letting earthly allegiances take a back seat: our politics, our need to be right, our desire for control, or our constant need for comfort.

The world will keep telling you that power means being on top. But Jesus tells the truth about blessing.

Blessed are the meek. Blessed are the merciful. Blessed are the ones the world forgets. And blessed are we when we learn to see them the way Jesus does.