

1st February 2026
(4th Sunday after the Epiphany)

READINGSⁱ

Psalm 15

Micah 6:1-4, 6-8

Matthew 5:1-12

REFLECTION

(Rev. Toby Keva)

I often come across videos of social media influencers on Instagram who like to give away generous gifts to strangers who are in need. The recipients, obviously, are often very grateful for the gift from people that they don't even know. Videos like this often attract hundreds if not thousands of people who watch and like them.

When I first saw them, I thought the interactions were quite genuine. After all, the influencers were sharing their own wealth to others in need.

But, the more I think about those videos, the more I question about their true motivation. After all, if they were really that genuine, why posting the videos on social media for other people to see?

Indeed, these social media influencers do this kind of act of 'generosity' not only to help, but also to gain more followers. Social media influencers like them know that the financial benefit from making such content will outweigh whatever money they give away. In other words, their acts of 'generosity' are actually more like a business transaction than a genuine help.

Friends, we live in the world where many things that we do is a response to the question, “What’s in it for me?” We may ask the question even when we do something that is positive like giving a donation. For example, when I donate to a charity, I often ask: “How much from this that I can claim on my tax return?”

The same thing can happen even when we listen to Jesus’ teaching of the beatitudes in the Gospel. “Blessed are those who hunger and thirst for righteousness, the merciful, the pure in heart, the peacemaker, the persecuted for my sake.” When we hear these, we may ask, “If we do and become all these things, what do we get in return? What’s in it for me?” After all, does Jesus not say himself that those who do and become all these things will be ‘blessed’?

Now, the word ‘blessed’ is a translation of the Greek word, *makarios*, which also means ‘happy’, or ‘fortunate’. So, are we not supposed to be happy or be fortunate if we do all these things?

But, I don’t think when Jesus says, ‘Blessed are you,’ he talks about the kind of worldly happiness or fortune. If he does, then Christianity is simply another type of pop psychology whose final goal is to make us feel good about ourselves.

After all, I can’t imagine someone feeling happy when she is lacking what she needs to survive; or someone feeling fortunate as she is mourning the loss of her loved one. Surely Jesus doesn’t expect people who experience tragedies to be joyful?

So, I think the blessing here is less about what we feel, but more about being right. When we work for justice and righteousness; when we are merciful towards others—even our enemies; when we do something with pure motive; when we promote peace instead of vengeance; when we are willing to put aside our needs for the gospel’s sake, we are blessed, which means that we are in the right relationship with God.

Indeed, our readings today come from the prophetic tradition of the Bible. It is a response to another major tradition in the Bible, namely the ‘priestly’ tradition, that often advocates for religious obedience. This prophetic stream, however, espouses ethical living, instead of religious conformity, as the path towards being right before God.

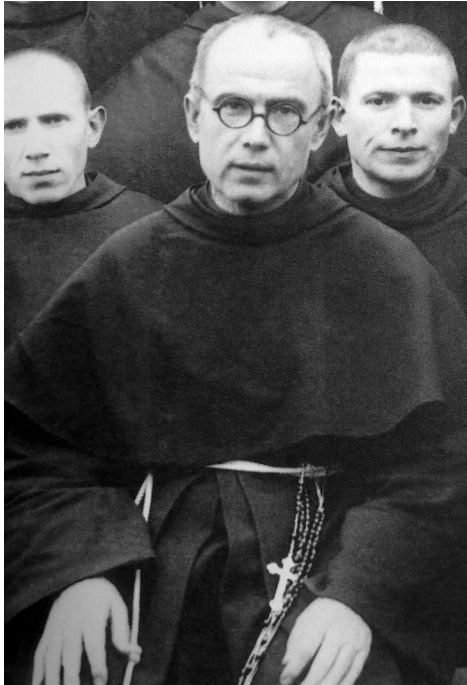
It is this prophetic tradition that Jesus continued in his own ministry. For Jesus, just like for the prophets, to be right with God meant to be right with other people.

So, at the heart of our readings today is the question, “Who is good in the eyes of God?” The question that Jesus tries to answer is, “Whom does the Kingdom of Heaven belong to?” For the author of Psalm 15, the question is, “Who can dwell in the house of the Lord”? For the prophet Micah, it is the question, “Who can come to the presence of God?”

The answer is unequivocal: the person whom the Kingdom of Heaven belongs to; the person who is good enough dwell in the house of the Lord; the person who can be in the presence of God’s without being consumed by God’s holiness; that person is not someone who is religiously pious; or someone who gives the most tangible items during public worship; or someone who strictly follows religious laws. No, the person whom God honours the most is the person who lives righteously; the person who treats another person well as a fellow human being.

Let me tell you a story about a man who exemplified this in his life and death.

His name is Maximillian Kolbe.



He was a Roman Catholic priest and a Franciscan friar who lived in Poland during the WWII. When the NAZI Germany occupied Poland, he and others in his monastery fed, clothed, and hid around 3000 refugees. Among the refugees they helped were around 1500 Jews.

As the result of this, Maximillian was arrested and sent to the notorious concentration camp, Auschwitz. There, he suffered brutal torture and mistreatment.

One day, the guards captured three prisoners who tried to escape. As a punishment, the chief of the camp ordered 10 random prisoners to be starved to death.

When one of the ten heard his name being called, he screamed, “My wife! My children!” When Maximillian heard this, he stepped out of the line and told the guards that he would like to take the man’s place instead. They agreed, so Maximillian, and nine other prisoners, were sent to a dungeon where they would slowly die from starvation.

Maximillian was obviously a religious person. He, after all, was a member of the clergy and it was his responsibility to ensure that the rituals of his denomination be faithfully performed.

But, for him, his calling as a priest was more than simply to lead rituals. For him, his calling was also about offering himself for others, just like Jesus. For him, his calling was to embody Christ’s sacrifice that he regularly commemorated in the eucharist.

On October 10, 1982, Pope John II canonized Maximillian Colbe in the Catholic Church. He is now venerated not only by the Catholics around the world, but also by the Anglicans and Lutherans. His life has been made into film and many books have been written about him.

But none of these things was surely in his mind when he stepped out of the line to take the place of the Jewish person to be executed. He did it simply because he believed it was the right thing to do; because it was the only way, in that situation, that he could be true to his calling.

And that was his reward, nothing else: to know that he had done the right thing; to know that he could stand before his God with integrity.

In that moment, Maximilian Kolbe was 'blessed', not by a worldly blessing, but by a heavenly blessing that is beyond any human comprehension. He exemplified the very person in Psalm 15 who stood by his oath to even to his hurt.ⁱⁱ And because of this, he became what Psalm 15 calls as someone who cannot be moved.ⁱⁱⁱ

So, the question we need to ask ourselves is not, "What's in it for me?" No. The question we need to continually ask is, "What is the right thing to do in the eyes of God?" And to be found right in the eyes of God, to find the approval of heaven is its own reward. Nothing else.

Friends, following Jesus is never about finding a tool to feel good about ourselves. Followers of Jesus were used to be called as the followers of the 'way'. Indeed, Christianity is not a tool to make us happy; it is a way that we choose; a lifestyle that we adopt, even if that path and that lifestyle lead us further and further away from worldly comfort and glory.

Amen.

ⁱ New Revised Standard Version Updated Edition of the Bible.

ⁱⁱ “who stand by their oath even to their hurt... (Psalm 15:4 NRSV).”

ⁱⁱⁱ “Those who do these things shall never be moved (Psalm 15:5 NRSV).”