

Potpourri

Did you know that the Mount of the Beatitudes mentioned in today's Gospel is 190 feet *below sea level*? It overlooks the whole Sea of Galilee where Jesus used to go boating – which is itself 509 feet *below sea level*. In other words the “Mount” is pretty much a hill in a hole. When I visited there on a tour of the Middle East many, many years ago I visited the church of the Beatitudes upon the summit of the “Mount” and was first impressed by the letters *E F 15* inscribed upon the mosaic floor of its entrance. If I recall the number correctly the inscription meant: built in the 15th year of the *Era Fascista* (the Fascist Era) – as part of Benito Mussolini's Middle Eastern benevolence. Since the *Era Fascista* only lasted until 1943 (21 years) it hardly deserves the title of an Era!

Today's first reading in our Roman liturgy is taken from the brief prophecy of Zephaniah which, our Catholic Bible says “emphasizes, perhaps more than any other prophecy the devastation and death that divine judgment will bring” upon evil doers. You may remember the moody words and music of the hymn *Dies Irae, Dies Illa* that used to be sung at Requiem Masses. Zephaniah wrote the lyrics.

That being the case, in a spirit of ecumenism, I chose the alternative first reading used today by our Methodist brethren as lighter fare. The reading is taken from the prophet Micah and makes reference to the delightful story of Balaam's Ass! Micah tells of the days when the Israelites were still exiting Egypt en route to their promised land. They were about to pass through the territory of the Moabites whose king wanted to block their entry to his kingdom. Rather than build a wall, he summoned a soothsayer named Balaam to put a curse upon the Israelites.

Balaam arrived on his – let's say donkey. But before he could curse the Israelites his donkey balked – having seen an angel with a drawn sword blocking its way. Balaam didn't see it and so beat the donkey but it refused to advance. Finally a miracle happened. The donkey spoke! Essentially it said, “Don't you see that angel with that drawn sword? Even a donkey can recognize God when he sees him!” Anyway Balaam tried to curse the Israelites but every oracle he uttered turned into a blessing – promising prosperity to the immigrants. Balaam never got paid for his services. Seems to have relevance today.

Which brings me to another verse of the Methodist selection today from Micah. Once again many years ago when I transferred to our Franciscan seminary near Catholic University in Washington, D. C. and needed a new spiritual director; the older seminarians recommended Fr. Replier (spelling?), a Marist priest retired at 90 years of age. When I first entered his monastic chamber I thought it was about to implode, the room was so overhung with bookshelves leaning forward from ceiling to floor.

Much to my surprise his spiritual advice directed me to contemplate a model of our solar system! Thus: if the Sun is reduced to a diameter of 6 feet, the earth (the size of a grape) will orbit 1 city block from the Sun, Jupiter 5 blocks, Saturn 10 blocks, Neptune 30 blocks away - and the nearest star to our solar system will stretch another 25,000 miles away; and myself amid all such empty space would be but the size of an invisible atom! So why, he continued, amid so fabulously immense a world, should one let one's spiritual life get too complicated. Just follow what Micah advises when he says: *What does the Lord require of you but to do justice, and to love kindness, and to walk humbly with your God?*