

4th SUNDAY OF YEAR A Jan 29, 2017

THE BEATITUDES

We just heard the beginning of the Sermon on the Mount which takes up three chapters in St. Matthew's gospel that cover much of Jesus' reinterpretation of the Old Law, with his you have heard it said... but I say to you..., with his teachings on prayer, hidden fasting and almsgiving known only to the Father, true riches, and the Golden Rule.

For a time after Vatican II the Beatitudes were translated as Happitudes, as our Fr. Anselm described them, obviously not pleased. We just sang in the refrain, "how happy are the poor in spirit..." but in the Lectionary we have long returned to the older translation. What is the difference between being blessed and being happy? Happy conjures up connotations of good fortune, luck, comfort, contentment, and prosperity. Blessed in its first meanings is associated with gifts and benefits from a deity, from God. So synonyms are holy, hallowed, divinely favored, and blissful.

Some of these poetic, proverb-like sayings are not about things people think of as cause for happiness: blessed are the poor, the sorrowing, those insulted, slandered and persecuted. I want to speak about the first one. What does it mean to be 'poor in spirit'? The word 'poor' we usually associate with material neediness, the lack of basic necessities for a decent life. 'Poor in spirit' means another kind of neediness. That may sound like someone who is lacking the joie de vivre, in need of purpose, meaning of living, of having a sense of their own worth.

Another bible translates the first beatitude with a different perspective: "How blessed are those who know their need of God, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven." A Carthusian spiritual writer states that 'poverty is the door to blessedness.' One has to have purity of heart and an enlightened mind to grasp that paradoxical truth.

Our material wellbeing is totally contingent on God's providential care by the ordering of the elements of environment along with giving humans the practical knowledge of the natural laws. Imagine the farmer saying one day after a long dry spell, 'there is not a blessed drop of rain again.' Our spiritual destitution is also totally contingent on God's providing. Jesus made it very clear. "Without me you can do nothing." Paul reminded us too. "What do you have that you have not received? If then you received it, why do you boast as if it were not a gift?"

One has to be meek and humble to be able to admit those truths. If poverty and emptiness are the door to blessedness, the emptier we are of the false sense of control and self-justification, the more space we open within us for God to pour in his Spirit and his other gifts. However, we all know it is not easy to accept the relinquishment of all of our pretensions of self-sufficiency and rights because we keep the laws so well.

We have a models of how this works for great things to happen when one is totally open to God's gift and graces. Mary was pure of mind, body and heart, longing for the coming of the Messiah of her people. She was so humble and empty of self that God poured his own self into her. In total trust in God's word she answered "Let it be done to me as you say" and "the Word was made flesh and dwelt among us."

We follow her example when we admit that the lasting happiness we long for, eternal union with God, is not our own doing. It is God's gift. We are his handiwork. Paul wrote to the Philippians, "Your attitude must be that of Christ, the other model: "Though he was in the form of God, he did not deem equality with God something to grasped at. Rather, he emptied himself and took the form of a slave, being born in the likeness of men.... It was thus that he humbled himself obediently accepting death, death on a cross."

So let us open our minds and hearts to receive all the blessing God wants to give us as we join together as adopted sons and daughters in sharing in Jesus' offering of himself at the Eucharist, and in giving thanks as we receive the pledge of everlasting life by worthily eating and drinking his blood. To the all Holy Trinity, Father, Son and Spirit, be honor, glory, praise, thanksgiving and loving obedience now and forever. AMEN

A Carthusian spiritual writer carries this idea of the blessedness of emptiness to the epitome. The emptier you are of yourself, the more you can receive from God. That is what makes you closer to his image. He even suggests that within the divinity, each of the three persons totally empties itself so that the fullness of the other persons may flow into him. This flows back and forth between the persons until one of them becomes the fullness of the others.

Between God and mankind, the author suggests that God found only one human being so self-aware of her emptiness that she alone received the fullness of God within her. You know who I mean, MARY.