

## All Saints – 2020A

It is interesting that on this Solemnity of All Saints that today's Gospel is on the Beatitudes. The Beatitudes are a road map, so to speak, for one to follow if they wish to be numbered among the saints. For several years I had difficulty fully grasping what the Beatitudes were all about and how I should live my life as a disciple of Jesus as a result. My homily today is the result of my attempt to unpack this Gospel passage and make it more understandable for me and hopefully for you. Unfortunately, the homily is more like a Catechism lesson and for that I apologise. Perhaps it will help if you keep your missals open to the Gospel, as we proceed, so that you can refer to the Beatitudes as we explore them.

In the Sermon on the Mount, Jesus redefines what it means to be a citizen of God's new world, a world Jesus called "the kingdom of God" or "the kingdom of heaven." Who are the people of God's world? While we all may look different on the surface and speak a different language, Jesus reveals at the very beginning of his discourse that there are certain traits that will be common to all of those who are becoming part of God's new world.

If you look closely at the Beatitudes you might notice that they build on one another. One student of scripture observed that you could really divide the nine Beatitudes into three sets of three, with each set of three Beatitudes following the same pattern: thesis, antithesis and synthesis.

When you look at them in this way, you begin to see that Jesus is laying the foundation for citizenship in God's new world which he will flesh out in the rest of the "sermon on the mount" of which the Beatitudes is the opening part.

**The first set of three** begins with the thesis: "Blessed are the poor in spirit for theirs is the kingdom of heaven" (v. 3). Plenty of people have debated what "poor in spirit" means, but here's where the context can help us. Remember that Matthew's gospel is written to a Jewish audience and is aimed at telling us that Jesus is the Messiah, the son of David and son of Abraham, and that he's the one who fulfills the law by embodying it. So, when Jesus talks about the poor in spirit, our clue to what that means is found within the context of his own life and character. If we want to know what being poor in spirit looks like, we turn to Jesus as the first example.

In chapter 3 of Matthew, we read about Jesus' baptism, where the voice of God says, "This is my Son, the Beloved, in whom I am well-pleased"(v. 12). That's an echo back to Isaiah 42:1, when God is speaking to the figure called the Suffering Servant.

Right at the outset, Jesus, the king of God's new world, is marked as a **servant** who came to give his life for the world (20:28). Jesus then immediately **obeys** the Spirit in chapter 4 and goes out into the wilderness where he engages in radical **self-denial**. To be "poor in spirit" combines these three traits of Jesus: servanthood, obedience and self-denial. The one who is poor in spirit recognizes that he or she has nothing to offer God on his or her own, that his or her life has no purpose apart from God. They obey God not out of obligation, but out of a desire to gain something better, the life of God's new world. The poor in spirit are those who voluntarily empty themselves so that they can be filled by God.

This leads to the second beatitude, which focuses the attention from the inward to the outward: "Blessed are those who mourn, for they shall be comforted." Disciples who are poor in spirit, who have turned their attention away from themselves, now turn their attention to the world and begin to see it as it currently is, a world in pain, a world where the selfish desire of sin dehumanizes people, a world full of violence, a world that has given up hope of redemption. Those who mourn are blessed because they are able to enter into the world's pain and grief and are not afraid of it.

Synthesize those two beatitudes together and you get the third: "Blessed are the meek, for they will inherit the earth." We tend to think of meekness as wimpiness, as though our lives could be written as a "Diary of a Wimpy Christian." But here meekness is a combination of the previous two elements: the power and decisiveness of self-denial in the poor in spirit, and the passion for the pain of the world in those who mourn. Those who both want nothing from the world and, at the same time, are willing to share everything with it are the meek. The spirit of self-denial and the spirit of service come together to make a new being, the most formidable person on earth, the terrible meek. They are terrible because they want nothing, hence they can't be tempted or bought, and they are terrible because they are willing to go to any lengths, even unto death, on behalf of others.

**The second set of three.** With the image of the "terrible meek" still fresh in our minds, Jesus then turns to another set of three beatitudes that follow the same pattern: "Blessed are those who hunger and thirst after righteousness" (thesis, v. 6); "Blessed are the merciful" (antithesis, v. 7); and "Blessed are the pure in heart" (synthesis, v.8). Whereas the first three beatitudes gave us a pattern for emptying ourselves, these next three teach us with what we are to be filled.

Another way of translating the Greek word for righteousness is "justice." Justice takes the meaning of righteousness out of the realm of the individual and into the realm

of the whole world. The people of God's world aren't just those who do good; they do good for a purpose, to bring God's justice into the world. In other words, they are those who see their lives within the context of God's larger mission of redeeming the whole world. They do the will of God, but they see God's will as being bigger than themselves. They're not as concerned about their own eternal destiny as they are about the destiny of the whole creation. They're less focused on justifying themselves than participating in God's justice for those who need it most.

But righteousness by itself can easily turn into Pharisaic self-righteousness. That's why we need the balancing of the second beatitude in this triad: "Blessed are the merciful, for they will receive mercy" (v. 7). Those who have hungered and thirsted for God's justice must begin to show mercy to those who need that justice the most. When you put the passion for justice and the compassion of mercy together, you become the "pure in heart," or the "undivided in heart" (v. 8). Blessed are those whose life is geared toward a single purpose that is both righteously merciful and mercifully righteous. These are the ones who are blessed to "see God" because they see the movement of God and the purpose of God in every person. They see God everywhere because they are always looking for ways in which to live out God's purpose through obedience, mercy, service and love. They see God the way Jesus said they would, in the face of the hungry, the thirsty, the naked, the stranger, the least, the last and the lost (Matthew 25).

**The third set of three.** "Blessed are the peacemakers" (v. 9); "Blessed are those who are persecuted" (v. 10); and "Blessed are you when people insult you" (v. 11 NIV). Take the meek who want nothing from the world, and the pure in heart who want nothing but God. Put them together and you get peacemakers!

The peacemakers are the ones who are resolute and active in their pursuit of reconciliation and justice between humans in conflict with each other, whether the conflict is between families, races, cultures or countries. The peacemakers, in other words, are those who stand in the gap and are willing to engage conflict with peace, to work for justice, and stay in that gap for as long as is necessary despite the sabotage that will inevitably come from those who are unmotivated or unwilling to change.

If peacemakers are the **thesis**, the **antithesis**, or that which acts against it, is persecution (v. 10). Jesus says that if you're a peacemaker, you are blessed! But Jesus also says, if you are a **persecuted** peacemaker, you're blessed again! The final beatitude, verse 11, is a variation of the previous one. You're blessed yet again if, after

persecuting you because of your peacemaking, they insult you and slander you, lie and talk trash.

History tells us that anyone who acts as a peacemaker will usually become one of the persecuted (vv. 10-11). Jesus is the ultimate example of that truth. As one theologian once put it, "Peacemakers must get used to the sight of their own blood."

If there's a **synthesis** for this final triad of beatitudes, it is in Jesus' concluding remarks. If you're a peacemaker, if you're a persecuted peacemaker, and if you're a lied-about, trash-talked, persecuted peacemaker, well then, basically, you can start rejoicing.

The synthesis is joy. The fruit of living a peacemaking, persecuted life, even a life that embodies all of the qualities Jesus itemizes in this list we call the Beatitudes, is **Joy**. Persecuted peacemakers in particular can rejoice because they're persecuted for doing something worth persecuting! They rejoice because they are walking directly in the footsteps of Jesus and the prophets. They rejoice because their peacemaking, even if it costs them their own blood, is making change possible.

The poor in spirit. The mourning. The meek. Those who hunger for righteousness. The pure in heart. The merciful. The peacemakers. The persecuted peacemakers. The slandered, insulted and persecuted peacemakers. These are the people of God's world.

The church is where we begin to develop this kind of character as we work and minister with each other. Living out the Beatitudes is the plan for all of us to be saints. Living like this is a sign that God's new world is breaking all around us. The more we focus on living like the people of God's new world, the more likely this present world will start to look beyond races and borders and toward a brand-new way of life!

