

“FIRST IMPRESSIONS” FEAST OF ALL SAINTS
Rev. 7: 2-4, 9-14 Psalm 24 I John 3:1-3 Matthew 5:1-12
By: Jude Siciliano, OP

Dear Preachers:

I have to be honest with you: I find the Beatitudes difficult preaching. They are so lofty, so frequently quoted, so over-used for all kinds of occasions; the stuff of epithets on cemetery gates. They are quoted like poetry and filled with popular sentimentalism. People have heard them before--- so familiar and therefore----a challenge for the preacher.

In addition to their familiarity, there's the problem of what preaching strategy to use. You certainly don't want to go down the list and comment on each beatitude. The preacher risks trivializing and overloading ---it's just too much for the hearers to grasp and keep in focus. (Imagine the hearers clicking off on their fingers the nine beatitudes as you work your way through the list!) There is a problem of interpretation as well. The Beatitudes shouldn't be used as a New Testament equivalent of the 10 Commandments. Jesus is not saying, "You must be poor in spirit, so that you can receive the reign of God....etc.". The disciple who lives these beatitudes is not doing so in order to win God's favor and reward. It is possible to live these beatitudes only as a response to what God has done in and for us. That's the way it was with the former testament; God acted first, and the chosen people responded.

The first word of the beatitudes lays out their spirit; the people Jesus is addressing are being assured, even congratulated. Despite their pain and suffering, they are already "blessed." They don't have to wait for some future congratulatory judgment; they have it already. These are the poor, the "no-accounts" of society. This is the first time anyone has ever called them "blessed." These are not the kind of people whom their contemporaries would consider "fortunate," nor congratulate them for their current state, the way Jesus is doing. God has gifted a people, and Jesus affirms that gift when he blesses those before him. He says the blessing and those around him are the recipients of this blessing, "Blessed are they who...."

Did Jesus confuse his tenses? Did he mean to say, not "Blessed are they....," but rather, "Blessed will they be..."? Wouldn't the future tense make more sense for reward because he is speaking to people who are presently in dire straits? He calls

them “blessed.” Somehow those who have turned to Jesus, though they experience suffering and even persecution, their life with Jesus is “blessed.” That doesn’t mean things are right or just for them, or that evil should not be struggled against. Yet, those linked to Jesus share in the very life of blessedness that was his. He is the one who was poor in spirit, merciful, meek, single hearted and a peacemaker. One notices in these beatitudes that Jesus is first of all describing himself--- he enfleshes the beatitudes.

Let’s make this harder still. The argument is often leveled that the beatitudes reinforce a passive and even a victim mentality. They seem to describe “milk toast” disciples who simply take what comes their way and offer no resistance to evil done them (after all they are “meek” aren’t they?). They are just holding out for some future promised reward. But Jesus is not calling people to be victims. He is blessing those who follow him and, as a consequence, suffer.

Suppose the beatitudes don’t describe virtues of different types of disciples. Suppose instead we look at them as a unit, as descriptions of the follower of Christ. This follower, the poor one, has placed confidence and trust in God and not in any human power. Such a person would be already rich in Jesus’ eyes, for that one’s life is in good hands, more secure than any other security they might try to provide for themselves. Then, the one trusting and looking to God, is filled with a burning desire to see things right. The translation from our lectionary is, “...who hunger and thirst for holiness.” However, another translation has it, “...who hunger and thirst for righteousness.” Later they are described as “persecuted for holiness (righteousness) sake.” These are people, Jesus says, who have the reign of God already and have a passion to see things set right, to see life here reflecting God’s will for us and all people.

These “poor in spirit” are not sitting on their hands looking to the clouds. They are working to set things right by showing others mercy, making peace, staying fixed with “their eye on the prize,” despite the persecutions they must endure. They truly are “single hearted,” having no false gods to distract them from their course.

In some ways, if we really heard the beatitudes we would need to read no further in the gospels. They convey the whole gospel message for us: Jesus, “God with us,” has enfleshed these beatitudes, lives them to the fullness. Those who accept him and his message have their lives transformed and their vision cleared. Now they see things in another perspective; they live in a trusting relationship to a God they

know to be a loving parent who wants to establish a new human community among them. These disciples have a completely different way of seeing and living with one another; they live under a very different rule called, the reign of God. As citizens of this reign, they dedicate themselves to it and invite others into the same reign, under the same loving God. Because of Jesus' life given for them, the beatitudes shape and empower their way of life. Thus, like him, they experience insults and persecution. Their lives are not free of pain; but their strength to continue comes from the one who has declared them already "blessed" and holds their present blessedness secure for them

ONE GOOD BOOK FOR THE PREACHER:

BLESSED ARE YOU: THE BEATITUDES AND OUR SURVIVAL, by Evelyn Mattern. Notre Dame: Ave Maria Press, 1994.

I highly recommend this book. It comes from the author's ministerial experience with the poor, as well as her background in literature, biblical studies, spirituality and women's issues. This book makes the practice of the beatitudes real for our time. The message of the beatitudes turns our world upside down and the author does a good job in showing us how they do that.

QUOTABLE

While the phrase "communion of saints" itself arises in a Christian context and often functions as shorthand for Christians themselves, the Spirit does not limit divine blessing to any one group. Within human cultures everywhere God calls every human being to fidelity and love, awakening knowledge of the truth and inspiring deeds of compassion and justice. Happily, those who respond are found in every nation and tongue, culture and religion, and even among institutional religion's cultured despisers. Indeed, where human participation in divine holiness disappears, the opposite appears: barbarity, cruelty, murder and unspeakable despair. At its most elemental, then, the communion of saints does not refer to Christians alone but affirms a link between all women and men who have been brushed with the fire of divine love and who seek the living God in their lives. From this angle the symbol of the communion of saints shows itself to be a most inclusive belief. It crosses boundaries, breaks down social lines of division and building up a vastly diverse people by the play of the Spirit through the ages and across the wide world.

-----Elizabeth A. Johnson, TRULY OUR SISTER: A THEOLOGY OF MARY IN THE COMMUNION OF SAINTS. (New York: Continuum, 2003), ISBN 0-8264-1473-7, page 306.

POSTCARDS TO DEATH ROW INMATES

“Can you imagine what it’s like to have your boy on death row? Can you imagine what it’s like to visit him there every Saturday and tell him, ‘I love you. I’ll see you next week,’ when you never know if they’re going to call and say, ‘He’s up next—it’s time for his execution.’”

----Jeanetter Johnson, Mother of Alan Gell, who was retried and found innocent because prosecutors withheld evidence that might have cleared him of first-degree murder.

[The News and Observer, February 15, 2004, Raleigh, NC]

Inmates on death row are the most forgotten people in the prison system. Each week I am posting in this space several inmates’ names and locations. I invite you to write a postcard to one or more of them to let them know that: we have not forgotten them; are praying for them and their families; or, whatever personal encouragement you might like to give them. If you like, tell them you heard about them through North Carolina’s, “People of Faith Against the Death Penalty.”

Thanks, Jude Siciliano, OP

Please write to:.....

- Shawn D. Bonnett #0037215 (On death row since 9/27/96)
- James F. Davis #0510234 (10/2/96)
- Melvin L. White #0434355 (10/15/96)

-----Central Prison 1300 Western Blvd. Raleigh, NC 27606

ANNOUNCEMENTS

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Thank you.

“Blessings on your preaching”,

Jude Siciliano, OP

FrJude@JudeOP.org