

The Heart Has Eyes

"BLESSED ARE THE POOR"

Texts: Daniel 7:1-3,15-18
Ephesians 1:11-23
Luke 6:20-31

(Series C. All Saints Sunday) Ps. 149

Prayer:

"Blessed are the poor in spirit: for theirs is the Kingdom of Heaven"

(*Matthew 5:3*). If you could live in Harlem in New York City, or in poverty stricken Bangladesh, which would you choose? A study shows that if you want to live longer choose Bangladesh. An article in the *New England Journal of Medicine* reveals that men over 40 can expect to live longer in Bangladesh than in Harlem.

The main reasons for shorter lives in Harlem are alcohol, illicit drugs, and murder, but given a choice in the matter, most of us would probably choose neither Harlem nor Bangladesh.

There is nothing glorious and appealing about poverty. Yet Jesus begins the Beatitudes with "*Blessed are the poor in spirit. . .*" He is surely not talking about physical poverty, is he? There's nothing blessed about being broke. So what is he talking about?

What does Jesus mean when he uses the word "*Blessed*"? William Barclay, a theologian claims that this beatitude basically says, "The joy of following Christ! Oh the sheer happiness of knowing Jesus Christ as Master, Savior, and Lord! "

"The Beatitudes are not statements, they are more like exclamations! "Oh the blessedness of those who know they are spiritually poor! The kingdom of heaven belongs to them!"

The word "**blessed**" is the idea that one is "*happy in the enjoyment of the blessings of God.*" Now when I think of that kind of happiness, I think of a certain Christian woman who visited a traditional church.

At one point the choir sang a beautiful song, and this woman was so deeply moved that she rang out with a loud, "*Hallelujah! Praise the Lord.*" An usher rushed over to her saying, "We don't praise the Lord like that in this church."

We're not used to expressing our "*blessedness*" quite as vocally as this lady did. We are the blessed of the Lord, and that blessedness consists of an overflowing joy. We live in a state of blessedness, and we have to show it.

"*Blessed*" was a word used in private letters of the day as an expression of warmest congratulations. "*The Beatitudes*" depict people who live the kind of lives that Jesus is describing, basically getting the best out of life. They are living the kind of life that is really worthwhile.

Therefore, when Jesus calls someone blessed, he is saying, "*Congratulations. You are the poor in spirit; yours is the kingdom of God.*" The point here is that Jesus is painting a picture of pure, untainted joy -- the ultimate state of peace and satisfaction with *one self, others and God.*

To be at this point "Our first responsibility is to God. This responsibility can best be demonstrated by a reverence for life that should make each of God's creatures a humble seeker and learner."

The point I am trying to make is about being in a state of humility that is willing to be guided. "*Blessed are the poor in spirit. . .*" These are the people who admit their inadequacy, and trust in God to supply what they lack. It's not a question of *blind* trust and *passive* obedience.

That's why the Gospel is Good News. It is good news because, God reveals Himself in Jesus Christ, as the "Man with the big heart." God doesn't demand we trust and to be dependent on Him, period. God wants us to trust Him and to depend on Him because He loves us, and He knows what is good for us.

In Luke's account of the beatitudes (6:13ff), Jesus gives the sermon immediately after "*choosing of the twelve disciples.*" We might call Jesus' sermon the disciples' basic orientation to the Kingdom life.

Therefore, Jesus begins with what is most immediate and most important: Their need for God! "*Blessed are the poor in spirit. . .*"-- a humble person who puts his / her trust in God.

This brings us to our final question: *What did Jesus mean by saying, "For theirs is the Kingdom of heaven?"* Does that mean that such people get special treat in heaven?

We need to understand that the Kingdom that Jesus talked about was a Kingdom that is *here and now experience*-- not one far off somewhere in the beyond after we die. "You are not far from the Kingdom," Jesus said to one man.

On another occasion he said, "The Kingdom of God is within you." Anyone who does God's will is a citizen of the Kingdom of heaven. Folks who know their *need* of God, *dependence* on God already have the Kingdom within them. This is why they are so blessed.

This is why the world cannot discourage or defeat them. They have a blessed assurance. Jesus Christ puts *humility* at the beginning. "Oh the blessedness of those who know they are spiritually poor! The kingdom of heaven belongs to them!"

This is blessedness, as Jesus teaches us in today's Gospel. He says, "Oh how happy are the poor in spirit. How *complete*, how *whole*, how *integrated*, how *fulfilled*, how *happy* are those who acknowledge their *absolute dependence* on God, not only for life itself but for the meaning of life."

It's like a woman I know called Emma Zander in Herbert, Saskatchewan. Emma suffers from Parkinson's disease, and she knows that she is dying. Even though age and her disease have worn out her body, they have not overcome her mind.

Emma still thinks deeply about matters of life and faith and she speaks openly to anyone who comes to visit her about her faith in Jesus Christ. Now it's difficult to understand her when she talks: her often-garbled voice makes listening difficult. But in a whisper she says, "As I get near the end, I have my doubts about many things in life. But my faith in God is stronger than ever."

Emma has something the world cannot take away from her. She has an inner peace, an inner assurance. And why is this? Is it because she has faith in her doctors? No. Is it because she has faith in himself and her own goodness? No. Emma is blessed because she has faith in God. Jesus said, "*Blessed are the poor in spirit, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven.*"

Today we celebrate All Saints Day. A set aside by the Church to honour Christians who have gone before us. All Saints Day is also a time for remembering those saints who have left this life and are now enjoying eternal life.

There are more than anyone can count, from every nation around the world, they may have been strangers in this life but in heaven, there are no strangers, living happy eternal lives and singing God's praises.

Some of those saints in heaven were once members of this congregation. Each of these people had their fair share of difficulties – but they never gave up on their faith in Jesus. Their hope was *certain* and *sure*. Beyond their dying, was a treasure stored up for them in God's presence. Their example of faith and hope was an inspiration to all who knew them.

"*Blessed are the poor in spirit, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven.*" What Jesus is saying to us this morning is about a Kingdom that is in the *here* and *now* -- not one that is far off somewhere in the beyond after we die. "You are not far from the Kingdom." Jesus says!

All Saints Day is a minder when things get us down, when life is not easy, when sickness continually plagues us, when death is drawing closer, we are reminded today to look at the big picture. We are not alone.

God has not abandoned us. Yes, we will be tested for a while but just as he was faithful to those who have gone before us, God is faithful to us. With *humility in our heart* and *faith* in God we will see the kingdom of God opens to us before our very eyes.

A French philosopher said: *“I would rather live my life as if there is a God, and die to find out there isn't, than live my life as if there isn't, and die to find out there is.”*

The Christian doctrine of heaven does not diminish this life below, it enriches it and makes it more significant. “Blessed are you who are poor, *(cast their dependence on God)* for yours is the kingdom of God.”

Amen.