

6th Epiphany 2022  
February 13, 2022

Let us pray. May the words of my mouth, and the meditations of our hearts, be always acceptable in thy sight, o Lord, our strength and our redeemer. Amen.

Are you familiar with the Starbridge series, written by the well known English novelist, Susan Howatch? They follow the trials, tribulations, struggles and deceits of various clergy in the Church of England. The first in the series is entitled, "Glittering Images." I will give nothing about that novel away, other than to say that clergy can also live a life wherein the cult of celebrity-hood becomes a favorite graven image. (Are you surprised??)

That becoming a celebrity has now become one of our favorite desires was reinforced for me this week when I read about a survey conducted amongst high school students in New York as to what they most aspire to be. The answer was not surgeon or teacher, astronaut, scientist or inventor, farmer, clergy, fireman, banker, author or policeman. The number one answer was, "celebrity".

As I thought about this, (and realized that there are plenty of us adults who secretly, or not so secretly, desire the wealth, power, attractiveness, appeal, admiration, status, etc. that we associate with celebrities), I at the same time was considering the very words of Jesus that we have just heard together: "Blessed are you who are poor, blessed are you who are hungry now, blessed are you who weep now, blessed are you when people hate you, and when they exclude you, revile you, and defame you on the account of the Son of Man." Does Jesus not understand that, in order to attract fans these days, you need to make yourself into a star? Would he not gather more fans if he said something along the lines of, "Blessed are the wealthy, blessed are the beautiful, blessed are the rich and powerful"?

Today's passage comes from a moment when near Jesus' earthly ministry. Is getting underway. He has been baptized. He has spent time in the wilderness. He has gathered his first disciples. He has announced that "the kingdom of heaven has come near." He has worked a number of miracles. He has just spent a night in prayer on the mountain which time he chooses the twelve apostles from amongst his disciples. And now he has come down from the mountain, stands on the plain, and begins to teach the crowds about this kingdom he has come to proclaim.

Obviously, the crowd on that Palestinian hillside 2,000 years ago was not comprised of middle-class and upper middle-class Americans who are frustrated by certain

inconveniences in life. He was addressing his fellow Jews who were enduring the Roman occupation, a political and economic occupation that had reduced most of them to poverty. This was not just a matter of trying to eek out a decent living. This was a matter of simply surviving day by day.

Furthermore, Jesus 'countrymen were living in constant fear. The Roman occupiers had no qualms about executing anyone who stepped out of line. Indeed, this was seen as an opportunity to remind the people as to what happens to people who resisted their authority. The Romans equated peace with order and obedience to the emperor. The best way to keep that peace was to crush all those foolish enough to oppose their authority.

Thus, in Luke's depiction of the sermon on the plain, Jesus is speaking first and foremost to a people who are struggling to survive this foreign occupation and have come to believe in their desperation that their God, the God of Abraham and Sarah, the God of Moses and the prophets, the God of Israel, has abandoned them.

It is to these people that Jesus declares, "Blessed are you..."

This declaration of Jesus must have been so startling and disorienting that I am pretty sure many in the crowd thought they had misheard him. I can imagine someone shouting, "What did you say? Can you repeat that please?" I thought I heard you say, 'Blessed are the cheese makers'." Instead of telling the crowd that they are deprived and suffering, Jesus calls them, "blessed". Why?

Because His Father loves them, that crowd gathered around him, specifically, particularly and beyond measure. He is saying to them that, despite their present afflictions, the kingdom of God is at hand. Their oppression will end and they will be set free. Because in the end, God loves them and beyond measure. That is so much more than the power of positive thinking. Jesus 'words are an assurance of comfort, a message of encouragement, a promise that is also hope.

Now, let us admit that this blessing of Jesus may not seem entirely satisfactory, not then and not now. We are living in the gilded age of "instant gratification". We want God to act immediately if not sooner. We want God to eliminate the poverty, illness, pain, and injustice. And when do we want it? Now!! However, in a world where we are free to make choices, we must live with the consequences of both good and bad decisions. Jesus was not promising the crowd instant gratification. He was telling them that they were blessed because God will always be on the side of the oppressed and the marginalized and in the end God's love will prevail.

You know, it's worth comparing Luke's presentation of this sermon to the Sermon on the Mount found in chapters 5-7 of Matthew's Gospel. In Matthew, the first 4 blessings speak to the present condition of the crowd. They are poor, they are in

mourning, they represent the meek of the earth, and they long for justice and righteousness.

Blessings 5-9, on the other hand, are a call to action. Get up and get going.

Jesus says, "Blessed are the merciful". The world of Jesus' day was filled with cruelty, hatred, and intolerance. He is calling his people to counter that cruelty with mercy.

"Blessed are the pure in heart." One cannot compromise with the powers of this world if one wants to see clearly the kingdom of God.

"Blessed are the peacemakers". We are so often convinced of our own virtue and thus the vice of those who disagree. Sometimes, the strength of our convictions leaves no room for reconciliation, to the point that we desire to impose our views on others. The way of Christ, and the cross, requires us to do the hard work of finding common ground, of standing in the shoes of others, to seek to understand, of admitting we might be wrong, of trying to make our enemies our friends.

"Blessed are those who are persecuted for righteousness' sake". There is always the temptation to run and hide in the face of great danger. Someone is always benefitting from injustices committed and they will fight to keep their advantage. Jesus blesses those who are willing to stand for what is just and what is right in God's kingdom.

"Blessed are you when people revile you and persecute you and utter all kinds of evil against you falsely on my account." Following Jesus could cost you everything in this world, including your very life. Jesus blesses those who are willing to pick up his cross and follow him wherever he may lead. Wherever.

Returning to Luke's presentation of this sermon, one cannot choose to overlook "the woes" he includes. "Woe to you who are rich, for you have received your consolation. Woe to you who are full now...Woe to you who are laughing...woe to you when all speak well of you...." Ouch. I mean aren't these all attributes that we eagerly search for and work for in the society in which we were raised? I am sorry to report that the Greek word for "woe" "does not denote a mere misfortune, but a deep and inconsolable misery..." Anyone else feeling a little uncomfortable? I am.

I believe the point is this: When it comes to truly seeking to enter into God's kingdom here and now, riches and full bellies and the desire of status amongst our peers can only get in the way. These things end up so distracting us and absorbing us that we end up losing sight of God's kingdom, sometimes altogether. Instead of empowering us or setting us free, they end up enslaving us in a host of idolatries, where we worship the things of this world and not God.

Thus, I will end where I started. No one would confuse these beatitudes with important steps to achieving celebrity status. To be blessed by Jesus will not bring us material wealth, worldly power, the admiration of a million followers on twitter, or life-long good looks. But to know these blessings, and to live into the hope on which these blessings are grounded, will bring us that much closer to God's kingdom, becoming in the process the people Jesus calls us to be. Believe in him. Place your hope in his kingdom. And act accordingly.

Amen.