

Church of the Good Shepherd and St. John the Evangelist

6 Epiphany
February 11, 2007
Fr. Bill McGinty

“Doing My Bit! - The Beatitudes”

St Luke's Gospel today, gives us his version of the Beatitudes. They are not listed in quite the same way as they are in Matthew's Gospel, but the ideals are much the same.

But, there is one important difference between the two accounts. Matthew was a Jew writing for Jews, while Luke was a Gentile writing to Gentiles. Jews were expected to know the Beatitudes; they came straight out of the law of Moses and the Book of Exodus. But for Gentiles, especially Greeks, this was a new teaching.

Greeks in particular came from a culture and a tradition that had little time for the poor or the weak. Here was this Jesus teaching support the poor, the weak and the less fortunate, this must have been a teaching that amazed and astonished them. Luke's story of Jesus teaching has to be revolutionary to their gentile ears.

This idea that you can have it all now, wealth, riches and happiness, but you will not have it in the next world, flows all the way through Luke's Gospel. It is a teaching that any people, who came into contact with Jesus, find hard to swallow. Many people have read the words: “Woe to you who are rich, for you have received your consolation.” And have juggled to get around them. They would like to explain them away. But in the Gospel Jesus' repeats the teaching: “It is easier for a camel to get through the eye of a needle than for a rich man to get into heaven.”

It is a hard teaching to get around. In the centuries after Christ, men felt so driven by this teaching that they left everything, family, wealth and homes to journey out into the desert to live a life of poverty and solitude. Their faith in Jesus' teaching was so strong, that they lived in caves and spent the rest of their life in prayer and study.

As much as we might want to admire these Early Desert Fathers, few people would care to emulate them. Yet, down the centuries many Christians did, both men and women. By the 13th centuries whole towns were built around monasteries. They became hospital, school, workplace and even university, for whole communities. Right up into the 20th century, monasteries and convents were a life choice for hundreds of thousands of Christians.

We might well ask: “Why did they give up their whole life, family, friends, home for a life of poverty and real tough hard work, with no reward or recognition and certainly no appreciation.” Were they nuts?

Well, having lived that kind of life, working for a religious Order for twenty years, I can tell you, I did meet a few nuts. The old Italian brother, who sat opposite me in the dining room for two years, chewed all his food 26 times and then spat it out on his plate. We had an old

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priest, who went around the college collecting tools. If he saw you up a ladder doing a repair job, he would steal all your tools from the bottom of the ladder. After he died we found more tools in his room than there are in Home Depot.

But for everyone who we might have described as mildly eccentric there were hundreds who were poets, painters, artists, great craftsmen, fantastic musicians, excellent sportsmen, great teachers and wonderful pastors and scholars.

In a twenty year period from 1970 to 1990 they were all gone. As gone as "*Gone With the Wind*." And not just they, but their colleges and schools leaving only universities that they had founded and a few scattered monasteries and religious houses with the old and the retired left wondering where it all went to?

The Gospel teaching of the Beatitudes is still there, as clear as it was two thousand years ago. Have we found a new way of responding to it? Have we in the last 20 years learned something that Christians should have known centuries ago?

Perhaps, today we would like to say that we are more enlightened. Perhaps we will want to point to modern biblical scholarship and say: "No, no. Jesus didn't want us to be poor and give up our wealth. He just wanted us to be "Poor in spirit, (get it?) And be kind to poor people."

In the last 20 years, whole swaves of churches have sprung up where the minister every week tells his congregation: "Wealth is good. If God loves you, he will bless you. Do not turn your back on the gifts that God sends you, for wealth is a gift of the Holy Spirit."

These churches are not badly attended. They have congregation that number in the thousands, because they give out a message that many people want to hear. "I too deserve a piece of the pie. I want to be blessed by God. Where is the icing on my cake?"

Every time I read about this "New Gospel" or see it on television, with a two hundred member choir, I want to go back to the monastery and see old brother Lorenzo chew and spit out his food all over again.

People, we play around with the Gospel and the word of God, at our peril. For it seems to me that our Lord and Savior, the Son of God, was bright enough and smart enough, to know exactly the words he meant to use and did use to bring God's people to salvation.

It seems to me, that what Jesus meant by poor was: "Those people over there who are suffering, sick, without food, hungry and often naked." And it seems to me he meant by rich, those who have everything and then a lot more, and are enjoying being so wealthy to the Nth degree.

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And unless we are all blind, deaf, dumb and stupid, it strikes me that we cannot help, but notice that around the world, but in our country too, we have people hungry, poor, sick, naked, lost and in peril.

In the Gospel, Jesus does not tell us what we should do next. He expects with half a brain we can put 2 and 2 together and work it out. I have a bucket of rice. Francis has no rice. I feed Francis.

The Beatitudes are not casual observations by Jesus to his disciples, they are moral imperatives. They are commands: "Look after your poor brothers or sisters or I want nothing else to do with you, in this life or the next."

This is tough teaching. It makes us all think. And not just about how much money each of us has in the bank. Dipping our hand in our pocket is too often the easy way out.

"Well we have the Food Pantry," I hear you say. When is the last time you worked in the Food Pantry? For the last year the Food Pantry has been crying out for volunteers, volunteers who will come work one hour on a Friday night.

The truth for all of us here in Milford, is often hard to take, faced with a Gospel like today's. The truth is, that when it comes to our time, we value it more than our money, and we will not give it away to the poor or Jesus himself, if he walked through the door.

I have 12 to 14 burnt out, washed up, tired and worn out wonderful people in this parish, who when it comes to the poor, the prison, the Food Pantry and the Liturgy do nearly everything.

We have never, and I mean never, had so little help as we have had over the last six months.

The Gospel today, tells all of us why we as a church, and as a Community of Faith, are here. We are here to witness to the teaching of our Savior Jesus Christ and make those teachings come alive for everyone in need in our area.

We have done the easy bit. We do give financial. Now we need to shake ourselves and rally around the Nancy Hollerans and the Lucie Brooks of this parish and give the thing we value most to Christ and his Kingdom, our time and effort.

Do we have to wait until Nancy or Lucie or any of my 14 saints keel over and faint, before we decide that it's my turn to get off my butt and do my part?

People, the poor are not going away, nor is the Gospel of Jesus Christ. If we no longer participate in Christ's church, just be sure that will wash with Jesus on that last day.

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It is easy for me to be a popular pastor and never challenge you, or dare make a ripple when I see things that are wrong. But that is not why God put me here. God put me here to preach his word even when that word makes you uncomfortable, when it shakes your comfort zone.

I am here to make you feel ill at ease. We have so little help in the church at this present time that I have to tell you now it is affecting our ability to serve God's people. I have a pastoral team that needs to know we have shut-ins who need your attention. I have Evangelists who need to evangelize. I have an Altar Guild of ladies who strive beyond their pain to prepare God's Altar and have been crying out for help for 12 months. Who will serve when they no longer can? Who will visit the sick and help the poor?

If you thought you were coming to church today to hear a 'nice' Gospel then I have to tell you this is a Gospel that has Jesus point at each one of us and say: "I mean you."

We cannot reply to our Savior by saying: "I have done my bit, I have paid my dues. It's time for someone else to do it."

For Our Lord Jesus Christ did not pause on the Hill of Calvary and say: "This far and no farther. I have done my bit. I have paid my dues." No, he suffered and died for each one of us, that one day we might share with him in the Kingdom of God.

Look at today's Gospel and decide that you too wish to climb that hill for your Lord and Savior.

There is nothing more precious that you can give to the poor and this Gospel than your time. Give your time and effort to Christ's word and his teaching and he will give you the Kingdom of Heaven.

Amen+

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