

All Saints (A)

(Apocalypse 7:2-4, 9-14 / Matthew 5:1-12)

01.11.2017

The danger with a gospel passage like the one we hear this morning is that we can be so familiar with the text that its message that it can flow over us like water off a duck's back. Even those of us who may be able to recite the Beatitudes off by heart – easily memorising the text because of its literary beauty and poetic quality – can fail to take on board what it calls us to live. We can dodge the essence of the Beatitudes and side-step the exigences contained in what we could call *The New Law* promulgated by Jesus in these *Words of Life*. To truly take on board the message of the Beatitudes is not only a little challenging, it could even be considered to be quite intimidating. How could any of us match up to what is required of us by Jesus in the Charter He promulgates here? To do so can seem beyond us. Let's face it, the Beatitudes make very radical demands upon us. This list of sayings which stands at the heart of Jesus' Sermon on the Mount is more than just a pious poem; it is totally revolutionary text. It obliges us to turn our whole value system upside down.

Essentially the Beatitudes call upon us to live in love: true love, God's love!

There is no denying that God's love is costly. It cost Jesus His very life.

God's love demands of us nothing less than that we make a total gift of our being, holding absolutely nothing back for ourselves.

To love in the spirit of the Beatitudes demands of us that we live *in Christ* and live *like Christ* and that implies that we dare to embrace Jesus' radical poverty. It is said of Christ: *Rich though He was, He became poor for our sakes... so that we might become rich out of His poverty.*

I believe the first Beatitude really sets the tone for all that will follow when it proclaims: *Blessed are the poor in spirit.*

The poverty of spirit spoken of here implies genuine humility of heart. There is a parallel between poverty of spirit and humility of heart.

Both these attitudes require of us that we embrace what we could call the paradox of Christian powerlessness.

Now there's a challenge for us!

Most of us are afraid to admit to powerlessness over our lives. We dream of being in control. Indeed, some of us might be tempted to argue that if we were to admit to powerlessness over our lives we would be giving-in to inevitable defeat in our struggle to live the Christian life. It doesn't seem to make sense to us that we can admit to weakness and, in doing so, find the strength we need to keep on going.

Let's not forget that the help we need to keep going is God's strength.

St Paul tells us that God's strength is to be found in and best manifested through our human weakness.

Once we recognise this to be true, we realise that in order to release God's grace in our lives we have to enter into the paradox of powerless and in doing that we are greatly relieved.

We come to understand that we don't have to be strong or we don't have to pretend to be perfect; we come to understand that holiness is God's gift and doesn't depend on our effort alone.

We are led to see that we can live a real life, one marked by daily struggles, in a human body beset with weaknesses, with the wounded psyche and troubled emotions that are ours. We

come to accept that we are people who have been scarred by our unfortunate life experiences and that many of our blemishes cannot be entirely removed in this present life. We come to appreciate that, accepting our life for what it is, with things are just as they are, we can find our happiness in the Lord's beatitude.

The saints found their happiness, true beatitude, precisely by daring to live their lives as they were, accepting whatever befell them by lot – daring to see the circumstances of their existence beyond their personal control as held in God's hands of mercy. The saints did not allow their state of weakness to hold them back from living their lives as best they could, doing so to the full.

I will like to propose at this point that perhaps what might help us more than anything else today would be simply this: to hear the Beatitudes afresh.

When I say *afresh*, I mean in a new way.

I propose quite simply at this stage to render the Beatitudes in a paraphrase that seeks to draw attention to the essence of what Jesus has to say to us.

This is how Eugene Petersen renders the *Sayings of Jesus*.

I believe this paraphrase can help us grasp the Beatitudes' essence.

*1 When Jesus saw his ministry drawing huge crowds, he climbed a hillside. Those who were apprenticed to him, the committed, climbed with him. Arriving at a quiet place, he sat*

*2 and taught his climbing companions. This is what he said:*

*3 "You're blessed when you're at the end of your rope. With less of you there is more of God and his rule.*

*4 "You're blessed when you feel you've lost what is most dear to you. Only then can you be embraced by the One most dear to you.*

*5 "You're blessed when you're content with just who you are - no more, no less. That's the moment you find yourselves proud owners of everything that can't be bought.*

*6 "You're blessed when you've worked up a good appetite for God. He's food and drink in the best meal you'll ever eat.*

*7 "You're blessed when you care. At the moment of being 'care-full,' you find yourselves cared for.*

*8 "You're blessed when you get your inside world - your mind and heart - put right. Then you can see God in the outside world.*

*9 "You're blessed when you can show people how to cooperate instead of compete or fight. That's when you discover who you really are, and your place in God's family.*

*10 "You're blessed when your commitment to God provokes persecution. The persecution drives you even deeper into God's kingdom.*

*11 "Not only that - count yourselves blessed every time people put you down or throw you out or speak lies about you to discredit me. What it means is that the truth is too close for comfort and they are uncomfortable.*

*12 You can be glad when that happens - give a cheer, even! - for though they don't like it, I do! And all heaven applauds. And know that you are in good company. My prophets and witnesses have always gotten into this kind of trouble.*

Perhaps I could end by making another simple suggestion.

This second suggestion is inspired by the practice of a community dear to ours: the Community of Grandchamp in Switzerland. This community lives according to the Rule of Taizé which claims to offer nothing other than life in the spirit of the Beatitudes. The

community of Grandchamp has a practice of pronouncing at the end of the Midday Office each and every day one or more of the Beatitudes for the community's consideration. This pronouncement of a Beatitude or Beatitudes in the context of their community prayer has for goal to invite all present to pray this text and, even more than that, to live it out in their mutual relationships in practical ways in the course of that day.

What a good exercise it would prove to be for us in our respective communities of life (our couple, family, monastic community etc.) to take one of the Beatitudes each day to meditate upon and pray its message, striving to bring it to bear on our relationships with others for that day!

I am pretty confident this would help us grow in the sense today's feast invites us to; this would help us progress in the way of holiness.

As the hymn-writer puts it in one of the chants of our repertoire of hymns here at the monastery: *The Call to Holiness is Ours*.

Let us engage ourselves anew to listen to that call and to follow that way, taking the gospel of the Beatitudes as our guide – seeing Jesus' Words of Life pronounced here as a roadmap for our Christian pilgrimage.

Amen!