

## Sixth Sunday in Ordinary Time – Year C

Some of you will recall, in 1991, the Canadian Catholic Church began using the *New Revised Standard Version* as its Bible translation for the scripture readings at Mass. Before then, the *Jerusalem Bible* translation was the text proclaimed at the Sunday and weekday Masses. The transition from the *Jerusalem Bible* to the *New Revised Standard Version* was a good one because, in my opinion, the *New Revised Standard Version* is the better translation between the two. The *NRSV* offers a good compromise between faithfulness to the original scriptural languages, and comprehensibility. Another reason for the superiority of the *NRSV* over the *Jerusalem Bible* is found in the Gospel reading today. The *Jerusalem Bible* translated the word ‘blessed’, as found in today’s Gospel, as ‘happy’. Now ‘blessed’ does mean ‘happy’, but it means a great deal more. The word ‘happy’ is handicapped by our culture’s shallow understanding of the word. Happy, at a superficial level, is only present when things such as wealth and food, along with comfort and honours are in place, warding off destitution, hunger, adversity and persecution. The problem is, we are made for more than happiness of this sort. We are made for ‘blessedness’, a word that has a fuller meaning than ‘happiness’, but whose meaning is harder to grasp. The *NRSV* gets to the more authentic meaning of this Gospel passage when it uses the word ‘blessed’ rather than ‘happy’. But what do we mean when we say ‘blessed’ rather than “happy”? If we don’t understand blessedness, the Beatitudes as found in the *Gospel of Luke* will make no sense at all. It will sound like counter-intuitive nonsense.

The key to understanding the Beatitudes and the corresponding Woes that follow is to reflect on the First Reading and Responsorial Psalm. The Prophet Jeremiah compares a cursed person with a blessed person, as compared to a desert shrub to a tree planted by a sure water source, in this case a river. The difference between the plants is the degree between of confident access to water. The shrub cannot trust in a steady supply of water, but the tree by the river can. So, the tree “shall not fear when heat comes, and its leaves shall stay green; in the year of drought it is not anxious, and it does not cease to bear fruit.”

In a sense the tree is not happy—it has moved beyond happy. The tree is blessed because it has found a bottomless life-source, a river that will insure it of its

perpetual life. Heat and drought may come, but the tree has access to a water source that cannot be touched by heat or drought. It is this that makes it blessed.

St. Luke records Jesus reminding his followers that they are blessed when they are poor, hungry, weeping and being persecuted now. At the same time, they are in a bad way when they are rich, full, laughing and being lauded and praised now. How does one make sense of these teachings? Go back to the tree by the stream of water. The tree thrives and bears fruit only because it draws its life from the river. The key to the tree's blessedness is found in the life it draws from the stream. Our blessedness, therefore, happens only when we acknowledge that it comes from a source beyond ourselves—God.

Jesus says, "Blessed are you who are poor". So why are the poor blessed? They are blessed because their lack of material resources leads them to greater reliance on God. This closer relationship with God enables them to find in God their blessedness, their ultimate source of authentic happiness. The Woe that is attached to this beatitude is directed to those who are rich. They are in a bad way because they typically do not rely on God. Their lack of reliance makes it difficult for them to enter the kingdom of God (Luke 18:24-25).

The next beatitude describes those who are hungry now. They are blessed because they look to God who will fill their need. Mary promises this in her *Magnificat*, where God "has filled the hungry with good things" (Luke 1:53). While this promise is fulfilled in the afterlife, it is foreshadowed in events such as Jesus' feeding of the five thousand (Luke 9:17).

Jesus also promises that those who are weeping now will rejoice. While the promise looks to the future, when all will be gathered in the Communion of the Saints in heaven, Jesus anticipates this when he raises people from the dead.

The Woes will affect those who are filled now and rejoice now. They are those who rely on themselves and live for themselves. In the future they will be hungry, grieve and weep.

The last beatitude concerns the persecution that is experienced by the disciples of Jesus. They are to rejoice because of the reward they will receive in heaven. It is recorded in the *Acts of the Apostles* that the Apostles, after being scourged, "left

the presence of the Sanhedrin, rejoicing that they had been found worthy to suffer dishonor for the sake of the name" (Acts 5:41).

The corresponding Woe warns us that when all speak well of individuals, it is because they were speaking like false prophets, not speaking God's word, preferring human praise to the glory of God (John 12:43).

The Beatitudes, as found in the *Gospel of Luke*, reverses the world's understanding of true happiness, reminding us that it is not found in riches, gratification, entertainment and fame, but in God. Learning this lesson on discipleship requires faith, since the promises and rewards may not be experienced until the heavenly kingdom comes. It also requires charity, as those with economic means are exhorted to tend to the needs of the poor, the hungry and the weeping.