

Sunday Homily

ALL SAINTS' DAY

1 NOVEMBER 2020

YEAR A

“Blessed are the poor in spirit,
for theirs is the kingdom of heaven.”

Matthew 5:3

Illustration

As we look around the church, perhaps during a dull sermon, we may well look at either statues, or the stained glass windows with images of saints. They seem very removed from our lives: perhaps a definition of saints would be “people who are not like us.” They are either flat, one-dimensional, or cold and unyielding as stone. In contrast, our lives are multidimensional, and pliable – but not saintly?

Is it possible to be saintly and in a mess? Surely none of the saints had the same problems with their children, or their marriage, or their relationships or their job as I do! Actually, they probably didn't have jobs – it's hard to see how saints could have the time to be saints if they had jobs. Perhaps most importantly, to be a saint you have to be dead. We can say, with conviction, saints were not, and are not, people like us!

Gospel Teaching

This Gospel passage is one of the most familiar of the Bible. Jesus claims authority to teach, by assuming the seated position of the teacher. In setting this collection of teaching upon “the mountain”, Matthew invites the comparison of Moses, the lawgiver, with Jesus, the giver of the new law.

Although clearly significant, it is not immediately clear how to interpret Jesus' teaching. It is difficult to translate the Greek word *makarioi*, which begins each of the beatitudes. It came to be used in Greek culture to mean “how fortunate”, or “how lucky”. Some translations offer “happy” as an appropriate English rendition – perhaps suggesting a sense of “congratulations!” However, Jesus' use should be drawn from Hebrew tradition such as Psalm 1:1, where “happy” is used to describe being “right with God” (objective) rather than being about “how I feel” (subjective) – suggesting that “blessed” may better capture the sense of the passage.

Is this objective blessing promised for the present or the future? The other passages set for this day indicate future blessing – and, in keeping with the apocalyptic genre, future resolution of today's difficulties. (Apocalyptic writing emerges from those periods of history when the social situation appears so irredeemably bad that the only resolution imaginable is an utterly invasive act of God, bringing the

existing age to a drastic end.) But is there no present benefit of faith in Christ? There is, at least, a present assurance of a future promise, to call believers to a distinct perspective upon life.

The kingdom of heaven is found in the present and future experience and reality of peace, “shalom”: a right relationship with God and one another which may only be found in Christ. It is given, not earned – it is the property of the “poor in spirit”, not the confident in spirit.

“Poor in spirit” is a description of the acknowledged need at the heart of our existence, rather than a description of inherent weakness. It expresses a reliance upon God, rather than a satisfaction with ourselves. The Hebrew scriptures do speak of God’s blessing upon the poor and his distaste for the rich, but riches were nonetheless the assumed sign of God’s blessing. Jesus vehemently reaffirmed God’s preference for the poor, who turn to him for mercy and in so doing re-establish the heart of the divine kingdom which is utterly reliant upon God.

The qualities described in these beatitudes with approval challenge many of our presuppositions of the signs of God’s blessing. Each one commends those who presently suffer in weakness, for their resolution will be at the hands of God.

Application

On All Saints’ Day we need to see that we are the saints. The beatitudes describe as “blessed” the lives of those who struggle, and suffer, and know their weakness. These are not the lives of stained glass, or plaster saints, but the lives of real people learning to rely on God in their everyday successes and failures, working together for that day when God’s purposes will finally be revealed.

Our hope is not that we will live our lives like some imaginary successful life lived by one or other saint from history, but that we will know ourselves accepted by God’s grace as members now of his family of saints – with our membership guaranteed not by what we have done for him, but by what he has done for us.

We are challenged to live out this truth of our lives – that we are children of God – as a response to what Christ has done for us, knowing that our present experience will be one of struggle, but encouraged by the future hope of glory.