

Sunday Homily

THIRD SUNDAY BEFORE LENT

13 FEBRUARY 2022

YEAR C

“Then he looked up at his disciples and said:
‘Blessed are you who are poor, for yours is the kingdom of God.’”

Luke 6:20

Illustration

One of today’s growth industries is stress management. Schumacher College in the west of England runs courses on “simple living” for high-fliers. Its head, Satish Kumar, was quoted not long ago as saying, “People buy smart cars, big houses, yachts and all that, but they don’t really have a life. They are so busy, so stressed, so guilty and pressured. They have no time to see their friends. They think they are rich. But if these things are bought at the expense of social, natural and spiritual values, then I’m afraid that I have to call this poverty.”

He was putting into modern terms what Jesus says in our Gospel reading. We may have everything this world offers, yet still be spiritually and emotionally poor. By contrast, western visitors to countries in the developing world often discover that while people there are poor materially, they are rich in their strength of community and shared values. They know what faith and love are, in practice.

Gospel Teaching

Jesus’ words, “Blessed are you who are poor,” are sometimes understood to mean that material poverty is a special source of God’s blessing. Certainly individuals who take vows of poverty in order to serve God often speak of his blessing and care. But material poverty isn’t automatically a higher spiritual state than material wealth. Indeed, poverty is often a curse. Many are poor today because of other people’s greed or violence. Those who are hungry or made homeless through accident, war or corruption can only be blessed if we help them and address whatever evils oppress them.

Jesus is not commanding us to sell everything and become poor. Rather, he’s commending a spiritual attitude. The word “poor” here means someone who’s at rock bottom, desperate. That may include people who don’t know where their next meal is coming from. But it also includes those who feel passionately that life isn’t worth living without God at the centre. They know their constant need of God. They’re more hungry for him than for worldly goods. And they mourn deeply the sinfulness that hinders their spiritual growth. When they put God first in their lives, they’re blessed. The word “blessed” is often translated “how

happy”, but it really means “how fortunate in the long term”. The spiritually poor possess the kingdom of God. That is, they receive God’s eternal love, care, gifts and power to serve him.

Jesus contrasts them with so-called “rich” people who are self-satisfied and who focus their lives on material things. They neglect God or move him to the margins of their lives. As a result, they know nothing of his forgiveness, and see nothing of his purposes. When they need him they may not find him. And those who reckon they are spiritually rich – who think their relationship with God is sewn up – will find their spiritual life drying up. Jesus, remember, was speaking to his disciples. A disciple, by definition, is one who knows there’s always more to learn and is always aware of his or her spiritual poverty.

And the opposite of “blessed” is “alas”. It means “how sad”. When Jesus says, “alas for you who are rich” he isn’t pronouncing a curse on people. Rather, he’s grieving over their blindness and foolishness. He’s sad that they’ve got their priorities wrong, that they’re missing out on the most important things in life. They think they are rich, yet they are very poor.

Application

It’s easy for us to agree with that! We’re not like them; we’ve come in our spiritual poverty and hunger to worship God and to receive his nourishment in the sacrament. And yet, as soon as we think like that, we risk becoming self-satisfied, that is, “rich”, and losing our hunger for God. It’s not easy to stay spiritually poor.

One way is to keep focused on Jesus. He’s perfect; we’re not. He knows all things; we don’t. He can do all things; we can’t. He needs nothing; but we need him. Or think of someone you don’t like too much; and remember that Jesus loves them as much as he loves you. Exercises like this soon show how poor we are, compared with him. And then we’ll start to hunger for him and to weep for our sins – which is when we’ll find his rich gifts to satisfy us deeply and, like tasty food, make us hunger for more.