

ὁ λόγος παρακλήσεως
All Saints; 3 November 2019
St. Thomas', Glassboro – Todd Foster
(rev. 201911021702)

Blessings and Woes

In nomine...

I. Intro

For me, one of the hard parts of being a priest is interacting with people who come asking for money. They see our pretty buildings and all the people who show up in fine clothes and fine cars and they think – hey: there's money there! In my more cynical moments I imagine some people think of churches as ATM's: they think if they come say the right words, like entering your PIN at an ATM, we'll pay off and they'll get some cash. Very often this means that people use a lot of words, hoping they stumble across the right ones.

There are lots of things not to like about these encounters, but the one that troubles me the most is the ambiguity, the unsure-ness about what to do. Because there are no simple, clear, hard & fast rules to guide me. On the one hand, I don't want to affirm the false idea that the church is an ATM, that we have money just sitting around to give away. I don't want word to get out that someone got cash here and three more people to come the next day. I don't want people knocking on the door of my family's home when just Becky or just the kids are home.

And yet... the Gospel passage we read today is UN-ambiguous. The Gospel is demanding. Yet my heart's desire is to be a disciple, a follower, an imitator of Jesus. So what do I do with these things?

II. Thesis

In the Gospel today Jesus makes some clear, counter-cultural claims about who is blessed and who is to be pitied.

Blessed are the poor, for yours is the kingdom of God.

Hear that word “kingdom”! That is a political word, all about forms of government and about how we live together. It was *not* an academic or religious or metaphorical word as Jesus used it 2000 years ago. When Jesus said “kingdom,” everyone knew exactly what he was talking about. He was talking about who was sovereign, who had power, who was to be obeyed, to whom allegiance was owed.

Blessed are the poor, for yours is the kingdom of God.

In Luke’s account, Jesus doesn’t say “poor in spirit.” He just says Poor. Hungry. Crying. Hated. Excluded. Insulted. Trash-talked and put down. These are the people whom Jesus described as “Happy” or “Blessed.” These are the ones Jesus invites to jump for joy. These are the ones for whom a new day is already upon them in the person of Jesus Christ. These are the persons who have nothing else to cling to, and so finally can cling to God. Everything else, every other hope and dream and promise, has let them down. They know loss and tragedy and sadness. They know that nothing else can be depended upon except the love of God.

And what about the rich? Woe, Jesus said! Woe! Woe to you with full bellies. Woe to you who laugh. Woe to you who are respected, respectable, well-thought-of in your community. Why woe? Because as long as we have these things – riches, plenty to eat, the confidence to laugh, a good reputation – as long as we have these things, we are going to rely on them for our well-being. We are going to depend on them for our happiness. We are going to rest in them for our security. And ultimately, they’re all going to prove flimsy, unreliable supports that are going to let us down. Then we will have no more consolation, then we will be hungry, then we will mourn and weep, then we will be proven flawed and deceitful like the false prophets who so delighted those who came before us.

Those very things that we strive for, with sweat and tears and sacrifice, those very things we want for our children and for our parents and our spouses and ourselves: those are the things

that distract us from a more authentic Kingdom, the things that threaten to become idols, the things that prevent us from finding the truest joy of putting our whole hope in God. That motorcycle I tinker with, that house I fix up, that book I read: they're not bad things. But they're not the best things. And as rich people, living in a rich culture, we are surrounded by a surfeit of "good-but-not-the-best" things which serve to draw our eyes and then our hearts continually away from God. Just one more thing and then... Just a little more saving for retirement and then... Just one more year and then...

III. Good News

Jesus isn't telling us that poverty is a one-way ticket into heaven. Jesus is not romanticizing the struggles of being poor. Jesus isn't saying that being rich automatically disqualifies us for the Kingdom of Heaven. But remember the camel and the eye of the needle. Money, comfort, status, and power are not evil per se, but they are traps and nearly everyone who attains them gets stuck in them!

That's why Jesus says, "I say to you that listen." Not everyone is going to listen. Not everyone is going to be ready to crawl out of the trap. Not everyone will recognize the essentially deceptive nature of these things our parents were so determined to provide for us. But Jesus throws an invitation out there anyway:

But I say to you that listen, Love your enemies, do good to those who hate you, bless those who curse you, pray for those who abuse you. If anyone strikes you on the cheek, offer the other also; and from anyone who takes away your coat do not withhold even your shirt. Give to everyone who begs from you; and if anyone takes away your goods, do not ask for them again. Do to others as you would have them do to you.

This is the path from riches into the Kingdom of Heaven. This is how to live, with plenty or with poverty, in such a way that our allegiance to God and to God's Kingdom is obvious to others and to ourselves.

IV. Invitation

But who can live this way? None of us can on our own. And the more we have: money, privilege, status: the harder it is to give it away in quantities that are meaningful to us.

So instead we live half-hearted lives striving toward whole-heartedness. We live in ambiguous, in-between places, staggering along on mismatched crutches instead of committing ourselves whole-heartedly to a single direction.

And when those who are poorer than us come asking for money, I find myself stuck and embarrassed and upset and undecided. Afraid of the consequences of giving. Afraid of the consequences of refusing. And hating the separation that inequality in power and money and status and even a full belly or a full gas tank creates between myself and my fellow human being.

Today we celebrate the Feast of All Saints. We remember those who have come before us, encountering these same struggles and this same, strangely terrifying invitation from Jesus. We call them "Saints" because they learned to trust Jesus and to discern God's will in their lives. God give us the courage to follow in their footsteps and do the same.

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