

Matthew 5:1-12^{v vi}

When Jesus saw the crowds, he went up the mountain; and after he sat down, his disciples came to him. Then he began to speak, and taught them, saying: "Blessed are the poor in spirit, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven. "Blessed are those who mourn, for they will be comforted. "Blessed are the meek, for they will inherit the earth. "Blessed are those who hunger and thirst for righteousness, for they will be filled, "Blessed are the merciful, for they will receive mercy. "Blessed are the pure in heart, for they will see God. "Blessed are the peacemakers, for they will be called children of God. "Blessed are those who are persecuted for righteousness' sake, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven. "Blessed are you when people revile you and persecute you and utter all kinds of evil against you falsely on my account. Rejoice and be glad, for your reward is great in heaven, for in the same way they persecuted the prophets who were before you.

^v About the Gospel: Matthew 5:1-12

The Beatitudes introduce the Sermon on the Mount and describe those who are in the kingdom. The "blessed" in the Old Testament receive an earthly fulfillment—of prosperity, offspring and long life. Jesus offers heavenly blessings, for the kingdom is present in him.

The first four beatitudes are directed to those who by their real deprivation, both physical and spiritual, depend on God, and through their faith do indeed rely upon God.

The next four beatitudes concern those who act, as in the kingdom, to set things right. The "pure in heart" are those whose thoughts and wills are centered on God. The name of the peacemakers, "children of God," is that given to Israel (Hosea 1:10). Persecution was common in the early Church, as we see in Matthew 10:16-33, Mark 10:30 and 1 Peter 3:14.

The Beatitudes are not conditional; they address the present situation of those who look to

God. The kingdom of heaven is a present reality with Jesus' advent, one that the poor and persecuted especially enjoy.

^{vi} Reflection and Response

If attitude is crucial to the way we live our days, it should be helpful to examine the attitudes of the saints. Their attitudes are no doubt shaped by the knowledge that they are God's children. It is a knowledge that allows them to live fully.

Jesus describes people who are living passionately and fully. He never mentions their successes. Rather, he speaks of their convictions. For instance, he uses words that we apply to our deepest human needs—hunger and thirst—to describe their commitment to justice. The saints are never miserly. They spend themselves with extravagance. They rarely offer the wimpy excuse, but often bellow Yes!

Such intensity enables them to take risks. Saints can be as saucy as the Samaritan woman who reminded an itinerant rabbi that he had no bucket and the well was deep. They can be bold as the woman anointing Jesus for his burial and wiping his feet with her hair. When she let down her hair—a gesture customarily done only for a woman's husband—she took an enormous risk that Jesus would understand. He did and memorialized her wherever the gospel is proclaimed.

Those who cringe at the thought of such public display can rejoice that all manner of sainthood is pleasing to Jesus. We remember and affirm the truth of Mother Teresa's words: "I have to be a saint in my own way; you have to be a saint in your own way." Our first step to being saints is to be ourselves and follow the path that God has designed for us.

It seems inevitable that human beings will slide off that path now and then. But while some of us would wallow in the misery of failure, the saintly attitude seems to be one of bouncing back. We might be meek enough to recognize that we won't always get it right, but we always try again.

All these saintly attributes are formed and grounded in prayer. Part of being poor in spirit is recognizing our limitations, then calling on God repeatedly to compensate for what we lack. No matter how late she went to bed, Mother Teresa rose at 4:30 a.m. to pray. Asked if the wearing effects of jet lag wouldn't sometimes interfere with that practice, she smiled and responded, "Never. I can sleep fast." The more she prayed, the more energy she had. Today we celebrate such splendid attitudes and such saints.