

The Blessedness of God's Reign

As devotees of old movies know, Mae West said many things in her time! She once remarked, "I've been poor and I've been rich, and believe me, rich is better!" Today, we hear the divine word which says "Blessed are you who are poor". What is "blessed" about being poor? Why would Jesus say this? What poor person would believe it? As we approach this Sunday's Gospel, we need to know that the biblical definition of the word "poor" describes a social reality and not just a person's economic situation.

In ancient Palestine, the peasant population believed that all goods — spiritual as well as material — were finite in quantity. Not only grain and livestock, but honour, friendship, reputation, love, status, power; everything, they believed, was limited in life, and if you lost any of these, there was simply no more where they came from.

If a person suddenly found what was lost, neighbours could become suspicious; they might wonder if what had been found was in fact stolen from someone else.

Remember the situation faced by the woman in the parable who found her lost coin [a parable unique to Luke, which we shall read later in the year on the 24th Sunday].

This woman had no choice but to summon her friends and neighbours and assure them she had not stolen this coin but rather had found what she had lost.



While in our culture wealth itself bestows a certain power upon people, in the ancient world a person tended to become rich because they already had power or strength to take wealth from those who were weaker and unable to defend themselves; thus power was the means for acquiring wealth. A poor person in that culture was essentially one who was power-less, unable to defend themselves against status and wealth. Remember, in the Bible, the poor are often referred to in terms of "orphans and widows". The orphan had no adult to protect his or her interests, and so was very vulnerable. The widow, even if rich in denarii, if she had no son, was still regarded as a "poor widow".

What is "blessed" about those in these socially unfortunate positions — poor, hungry, weeping? In that society, where one's honour was the core value, being poor, or defrauded of one's wealth, insulted, persecuted were not "honourable" experiences. Many would judge people in these situations as being "shamed".

In the Beatitudes, Jesus promises a reward from God for those who suffer from these shameful experiences. Indeed, he declared emphatically that the reign of God is good news primarily for the poor. He was looking at people who lived in humiliation in their villages, defenceless against the powerful landowners; he knew the hunger of the children, he had seen the peasant farmers in their helpless rage as the tax collectors carried off the best of their crops. They, more than anyone, needed to hear the news of God's reign. Jesus calls them *blessed* even in the midst of their unjust suffering, not because they would soon be rich like the wealthy landowners, but because God was coming into their midst, and God's reign would be good for them. God takes the side of the poor, not because they deserve it but because they need it. (Notice that Jesus doesn't praise the poor for their own virtues or qualities; the poor could be as greedy and guilty of taking advantage of those weaker than themselves, just like their powerful oppressors.) But God, the just God, must do justice first for those who have never received justice. This faith was rooted in a long tradition.

The people of Israel had always hoped that their kings would defend the poor and the marginalised. A good king would protect them, not because they were better citizens than the others but simply because they needed protection. Psalm 73 speaks of the ideal of the good king saying *May he defend the poor of the people, give deliverance to the needy and crush the oppressor*. The message Jesus drew from this Psalm, is clear: if any king knows how to do justice for the poor it is God the King, who is the great lover of justice.

Psalm 146 shows Israel's faith in this God: *The Lord watches over the stranger, he upholds the orphan and the widow!* The Old Testament book of Judith contains this beautiful prayer: *But you are the God of the lowly, the helper of the oppressed, upholder of the weak, protector of the forsaken, Saviour of those without hope.*

This is surely the Father-God Jesus knew and whose reign he proclaimed in his Beatitudes.

I will be at a Catholic Education Conference at St John's High school on Tuesday morning this week, hence the changes in the Mass schedule; and will attend the Funeral Mass for Marlene Kenny RIP in St Joseph's on Wednesday morning. The Council of Priests to the Bishop of Dunkeld will meet at St Mary's, Forebank on Thursday afternoon this week.