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Beatitudes and God's Ultimate Justice

Biblical Reflection for 6th Sunday in Ordinary Time C

By Father Thomas Rosica, CSB

TORONTO, FEB. 9, 2010 (Zenit.org).- Today's Gospel presents us Luke's beatitudes taught on the plain where people from all walks of life intermingle (6:17-26).

The reference to the coastal region of Tyre and Sidon in verse 17 means that not only Jews from Judea and Jerusalem, but even Gentiles from outside Palestine come to hear Jesus. Luke's version of Matthew's Sermon on the Mount has many similarities to Matthew's version (5-7), but also many differences.

Matthew has nine beatitudes and no woes, Luke has four of each. Luke compares the blessedness of the poor, the hungry, the weeping, and the persecuted to the sadness of the popular, the smug, the full, and the rich. "Woe" is Luke's way of describing what befalls those who fail to recognize God as sole source of true meaning and lasting joy.

Today's Gospel text (Luke 6:17, 20-26) contains the introductory portion of the sermon and consists of blessings and woes that address the real economic and social conditions of humanity. By contrast, Matthew emphasizes the religious and spiritual values of disciples in the Kingdom inaugurated by Jesus ("poor in spirit," Matthew 5:5; "hunger and thirst for righteousness," Matthew 5:6). In all the blessings and woes, the present condition of the persons addressed will be reversed in the future.

At the core of Luke's version of the sermon is Jesus' teaching on the love of one's enemies (6:27-36) that refers to God's graciousness and compassion for all humanity (6:35-36) and Jesus' teaching on the love of one's neighbor (6:37-42) that is characterized by forgiveness and generosity. Almost all the words of Jesus reported by Luke are found in Matthew's version.

Prophetic outreach

Jesus' entire ministry, which was centered on the proclamation of the Kingdom of God, took place around the northern shore of the Sea of Galilee, in an area noted for its violence and warring factions. Jesus seeks to bring justice into the violence of this area.

The crowds that listened to Jesus were awestruck because he spoke with authority, with the force of someone who knew the truth and offered it freely to others. The beatitudes reveal God's ultimate justice. They outline Jesus' prophetic outreach to those who live on the fringes of society. In this awesome Gospel scene overlooking the Sea, Jesus puts biblical justice into practice by proclaiming the Beatitudes. Authentic justice is a bonding of one's self with the sick, the disabled, the poor and the hungry.

New code of holiness

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The beatitudes are not an abstract code of behavior. Jesus is the poor in spirit, the meek, the persecuted, and the peacemaker. He is the new "code of holiness" that must be imprinted on hearts, and that must be contemplated through the action of the Holy Spirit. His Passion and Death are the crowning of his holiness.

Holiness is a way of life that involves commitment and activity. It is not a passive endeavor but rather a continuous choice to deepen one's relationship with God and to then allow this relationship to guide all of one's actions in the world. Holiness requires a radical change in mindset and attitude. The acceptance of the call to holiness places God as our final goal in every aspect of our lives. This fundamental orientation towards God even envelops and sustains our relationship with other human beings.

World Youth Day

I cannot read, pray or hear the beatitudes proclaimed without recalling with great emotion the voice of Pope John Paul II speaking about the beatitudes to hundreds of thousands of young people who were gathered in Toronto, Canada, for World Youth Day 2002. The theme of the beatitudes guided our World Youth Day experience and has deeply marked us at Salt and Light Television in Canada, born on the wings of that blessed event almost eight years ago. Let us recall with gratitude the words of the Venerable John Paul II: "Dear young people, [...] People are made for happiness. Rightly, then, you thirst for happiness. Christ has the answer to this desire of yours. But he asks you to trust him. True joy is a victory, something that cannot be obtained without a long and difficult struggle. Christ holds the secret of this victory. [...]"

"The Sermon on the Mount marks out the map of this journey. The Eight Beatitudes are the road signs that show the way. It is an uphill path, but he has walked it before us. He said one day: 'He who follows me will not walk in darkness' (John 8:12). And at another time he added: 'These things I have spoken to you, that my joy may be in you, and that your joy may be full' (John 15:11). [...]"

"Gathered around the Lord's Cross, we look to him: Jesus did not limit himself to proclaiming the beatitudes, he lived them! Looking at his life anew, re-reading the Gospel, we marvel: the poorest of the poor, the most gentle among the meek, the person with the purest and most merciful heart is none other than Jesus. The beatitudes are nothing more than the description of a face, his face!"

"At the same time, the beatitudes describe what a Christian should be: they are the portrait of Jesus' disciple, the picture of those who have accepted the Kingdom of God and want their life to be in tune with the demands of the Gospel. To these Jesus speaks, calling them 'blessed.' [...]"

"The joy promised by the beatitudes is the very joy of Jesus himself: a joy sought and found in obedience to the Father and in the gift of self to others. [...] By looking at Jesus you will learn what it means to be poor in spirit, meek and merciful; what it means to seek justice, to be pure in heart, to be peacemakers. [...]"

"Dear friends, the Church today looks to you with confidence and expects you to be the people of the Beatitudes. Blessed are you if, like Jesus, you are poor in spirit, good and merciful; if you really seek what is just and right; if you are pure of heart, peacemakers, lovers of the poor and their servants. Blessed are you!"

"Only Jesus is the true Master, only Jesus speaks the unchanging message that responds to the deepest longings of the human heart, because he alone knows 'what is in each person' (cf. John 2:25). Today he calls you to be the salt and light of the world, to choose goodness, to live in justice, to become instruments of love and peace. His call has always demanded a choice between good and evil, between light and darkness, between life and death. He makes the same invitation today to you who are gathered here on the shores of Lake Ontario."

A mirror

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We must hold up the Beatitudes as a mirror in which we examine our own lives and consciences. Looking at Jesus, we see what it means to be poor in spirit, gentle and merciful, to mourn, to care for what is right, to be pure in heart, to make peace, to be persecuted.

How can we be disciples of Jesus and put into practice Christ's teaching of the beatitudes? This week, let us ask ourselves some tough questions about Jesus' powerful lesson on a Galilean hillside.

Does the difference in the beatitudes in Matthew and in Luke provide any special insights for me? Which of the beatitudes speaks most powerfully to me? Why? Am I poor in spirit? Am I humble and merciful? Am I pure of heart? Do I bring peace? Am I 'blessed,' in other words, happy? What is my understanding of biblical justice? How do I practice it in my life?

And let us pray with the Venerable Pope John Paul II: "Lord Jesus Christ, proclaim once more your Beatitudes in the presence of these young people, gathered in Toronto for the World Youth Day. Look upon them with love and listen to their young hearts, ready to put their future on the line for you. You have called them to be the 'salt of the earth and light of the world.'

"Continue to teach them the truth and beauty of the vision that you proclaimed on the Mountain. Make them men and women of the Beatitudes! Let the light of your wisdom shine upon them, so that in word and deed they may spread in the world the light and salt of the Gospel.

"Make their whole life a bright reflection of you, who are the true light that came into this world so that whoever believes in you will not die, but will have eternal life!" (cf. John 3:16).

[The readings for the 6th Sunday in Ordinary Time are Jeremiah 17:5-8; 1 Corinthians 15:12, 16-20; and Luke 6:17, 20-26]

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