

4th Sunday in Ordinary Time

If we're honest, we are sometimes impatient with those whom Jesus calls blessed. The poor in spirit are uninteresting. Those who mourn are a drag. The meek are bothersome. Those who hunger and thirst for righteousness are annoying. The merciful are overly tolerant. The clean of heart aren't any fun. Peacemakers are spineless. When we see these qualities in other people, they don't seem very inspiring. Yet when we adopt these virtues, they bring solace and purpose to our lives.

In the first of the Beatitudes Jesus praises the poor in spirit and promises them the kingdom of heaven. Poverty is not the goal of our lives; we don't aspire to live bereft of what we need for survival. But poverty of spirit is a good goal. Detachment from the tyranny of material things helps us focus on more important matters: friendship, faith, love and gratitude.

The refrain we sang for Psalm 146 today comes not from the psalm but directly from the Beatitudes. It's that first one: "Blessed are the poor in spirit; the kingdom of heaven is theirs!" From all the teachings of Jesus, that is the first of his sayings from his first discourse, the Sermon on the Mount. The lectionary takes it as a refrain to help us meditate on the final part of Psalm 146, some of the most comforting verses in the bible. They bring hope to all who suffer any injustice. If you cannot afford food because of the cost of medicine, if you've been imprisoned without cause, if your eyesight is failing, if you feel depressed, if you fear unknown territory and an unclear future, if you've lost a spouse or a parent, if you've fallen victim to a telephone scam—then take heart from these verses of Psalm 146: "It is the Lord... who does justice for those who are oppressed. It is he who gives bread to the hungry, the Lord who sets prisoners free. The Lord who opens the eyes of the blind, the Lord who raises up those who are bowed down. It is the Lord... who protects the stranger. The Lord upholds the orphan and the widow." Even though no one aims to become poor, we sometimes sense the presence of the Lord more profoundly after we lose something in life. Poverty may be thrust upon us against our will. Some people get angry with God at times like that; others place their hopes in God's powerful hand. Such hopes are affirmed whenever we appreciate anew the things we have, including our faith.

In our times of material want, the Lord sustains us. Having that faith bestows on us a useful poverty of spirit through our ups and downs. It bestows on us a little bit of heaven. If we have it, we may inspire other people when they fall from the ups to the downs of their lives. Oh, people may be annoyed at us when we are meek, merciful and making peace. But in the end, they will want what the disciples of Jesus have: a share in the kingdom of heaven.

The downs of life want to overtake our brains. We dwell overmuch on our losses, especially those that seem unjust. But Psalm 146 offers us a way out. The Lord is not absent; the Lord is especially present to those who suffer loss. He offers something of greater value: justice, satisfaction and protection from all that is evil. The impatience we feel with God or with others stems from poverty within. But the same poverty can lead us to a different way of living: blessedness in the realization that no loss can keep us from God. The kingdom of heaven is ours.

Saturday, January 28, 2023