

Homily for February 11, 2001
6th Sunday in Ordinary time Cycle C

By Father Charles Bowes

Jeremiah 17:5-8
1 Corinthians 15:12, 16-20
Luke 6:17, 20-26

It takes faith, God's gift, to believe in the face of chaos and catastrophe.

Hear again Jesus's words:
"Blest are you who are weeping;
you shall laugh."

Do we really believe this in our own time of sorrow? Would you dare to say this or call it to the attention of a father who has just lost his child, or to a wife whose husband did not return from the post Europe war camps, who knew no ecstasy of reunion, but continues in the hell of separation and pain? Usually we say there is no way to speak such words in comfort or take them as consolation unless there is faith. But how do you get there – to that faith? Especially when we also read in Saint Luke's gospel, "Woe to you who laugh now, for you will grieve and weep."

Scholars admit that there are problems with the beatitudes according to Saint Luke – this Sermon on the Plain in contrast to Saint Matthew's Sermon on the Mount. Does Jesus really mean to incite class war by saying that the poor are blessed, and the rich are cursed by God? Religion had previously addressed the problem of economic inequality by calling the rich God's favorites. "Isn't it obvious?" one might argue. One must have done something wrong to be crushed on the bottom of the heap, and something right to ride

the crest of the wave. To reverse the trend and call the poor God's favorites is to question the wisdom of the world altogether, not to mention requiring a great deal of religious imagination...but that is precisely what happens in the revelation of God in Jesus Christ: those who are in need, rich or poor, are open to the invasion of God.

Saint Luke twists the original beatitudes of Saint Matthew in several ways: shortening and compressing them, adding the list of woes and, most importantly, directing the blessing to those who are truly poor and the curses to those who are truly rich. The apparent class warfare of Saint Luke is in fact, spiritual warfare, since "God's poor" are not only the visibly poor but all who side with them. Unlike Saint Matthew's gospel, in which Jesus teaches from the mountaintop – as did Moses deliver the ten commandments – in Saint Luke's gospel Jesus is on the plain – one with those who are poor and those who are rich. Saint Luke presumes that Jesus is addressing a crowd that includes both the disciples – arguably among the poorest members of society – and those who stand among the privileged. Even if Jesus could not be overheard by the materially wealthy of his day, Saint Luke's present audience certainly includes them. To invite them to "stand on the level ground" with the poor and be offered the

age-old blessing and curse is to give them the altar call of decision and let them choose to become one with God's poor for the kingdom's sake.

There is a short film entitled *Mourn*, about one of these beatitudes. It takes the title from the older translation: "Blessed are those who mourn for they shall be comforted." It's about the tragic death of a young husband. The wife's grief is unbearable. The film cuts back to a scene so full of life, the two of them racing in the park; the husband wins and says gloatingly: "You've got to lose sometime, you know." Now it seems as if she has lost everything. And yet the brief film ends on a note of serenity. She is not laughing, but she has won her way through to peace. The final focus is on her face, which is suddenly beautiful and calm, like the sun on the waters after a storm. How does the transformation take place? How does she get to this level of faith – this dramatic reversal?

The film indicates her awareness that a child is coming; her anticipation of this new life is one reason that she regains courage to face life. And yet there is something more – incorporating a montage of many shots of death and trouble – that this young woman, because of the wounding by her loss, now has a new understanding of other people's suffering. She has been baptized into a vast communion of pain, and she comes to a new perception that there is strength, not only to bear with, but to reach out. Strange isn't it – that what began as such a tragedy could become the energy for comfort even of others. Yet that is the mystery and the gift God bestows with faith in Jesus Christ. As

Saint Paul says today in 1st Corinthians 15, "If Christ has not been raised, your faith is in vain...(and) we are the most pitiable people of all."

So let us pray: Lord of love, make us poor; keep us hungry for your word, if we feel blessed let us rejoice and delight in your law for you are Lord forever and ever. Amen.

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