

Year A All Saints' Day Being the Blessed in God's Kingdom Matthew 5 1-12

1st Reading: Revelation 7:9-17; Psalm 34:1-10, 22; 2nd Reading: 1 John 3:1-3

In the Scripture we heard leading up to the Gospel, we have a beautiful picture painted for us – a beautiful picture of hope and of the joy waiting for us when we die. We will sing praises to God before the heavenly throne, in joyful worship night and day. Psalm 34 speaks of our radiant faces and assures us God redeems all his servants – all who take refuge in him, for we are loved by God, we are children of God says John in his letter.

A beautiful vision – we are smiling, angelic music is playing...Then we hear the jarring sound of the needle scratching across the record, the music halts, we feel the cold splash of water hit our face, and we open our eyes to see Jesus – “Not so fast, ‘Child of God’,” he says. “Not everyone who cries, “Lord, Lord” will enter the kingdom of heaven. “You want to be in that beautiful vision?” he says, “Listen up to what I’m about to tell you.”

That is where today’s Gospel story comes in – the Beatitudes, or blessings. To start with, Jesus goes up a mountain. In Matthew’s Gospel, if Jesus goes up a mountain, something important is about to happen. So, we know, this list Jesus teaches us, of who is blessed, is really important. These are the people we hear about in the beautiful picture painted by the other readings and we want to be a part of that so let’s listen in as Jesus teaches.

Some of what he is saying is straightforward and makes sense: mourners will be comforted, those who hunger and thirst for righteousness will be filled, the merciful will receive mercy, the pure in heart will see God, and the peacemakers will be called children of God.

But, wait a minute, maybe these aren’t so straightforward when you think about them. What are we supposed to be mourning? What sort of righteousness are we seeking? Who are we being merciful to? Just exactly what does it mean to be pure of heart and how pure do we need to be? And why would we be peacemakers when there is so much injustice that we need to fight against?

Well, fortunately, the other blessings – the ones that seem a little odd, the ones that maybe are a bit confusing, they actually help us better understand all of the beatitudes, that is, the list of who is blessed and will live in God’s kingdom.

The poor in spirit will live in God's kingdom. The meek will inherit the earth – that's God's kingdom too. Now, the next one is huge – Jesus says it twice in two slightly different ways... “Blessed are those who are persecuted for righteousness sake” and “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,” Jesus tells us. Our reward will be great in heaven, just like the prophets because they were persecuted too.

Now we have all the pieces we need to fit the puzzle together and figure out just what exactly Jesus was getting at with this list of people who are blessed.

Let's start with the prophets. The prophets were the messengers of God, chosen by God because they were aware that they were a sign of God's kingship and God's kingdom and so they behaved like it. They lived according to God's ways. The message they were sent to tell was simple – they were to remind the other people that they, too, were living in a world belonging to God...God was creator and ruler of all and they needed to act accordingly. There would be consequences if the people didn't shape up. You can't just say you're a child of God without living like one. It doesn't work like that.

So, what reaction did the prophets get? They were not welcomed. The people were busy pampering themselves, worshipping the false gods of pocketbook, property, and position in society. They were not only ignoring the less fortunate, most of them were pushing down the less fortunate and then keeping their knees on their necks to make sure they stayed down – cheating them in the marketplace, paying them less than a living wage, taking their homes when they forfeited on a payment...

Barbara Brown Taylor tells us we each carry two passports – one for the kingdom of God and one for the kingdom of “empire.” It is impossible for us not to carry two passports – we are children of God, citizens of God's kingdom and yet we have both feet firmly planted in the soil of the empire. I would be shocked if there were anyone sitting here who didn't have a bank account – even multiple bank accounts. Getting by in society means having a bank account. Just like owning a home or a vehicle means having an insurance policy. Booking a hotel room means you must have a credit card. Basically, being alive requires involvement with corporations and institutions that thrive on the world's principles of acquiring more – more money, more property, more stuff – in order to be happy, principles of personal power and consumerism completely contrary

to life in God's kingdom. We are citizens of this world yet we are called by God and sent out to "go forth to love and serve the Lord." Just like the prophets we have a message to proclaim and a particular way of life to live. It is a counter-cultural way of living that, thankfully, today in Canada won't get you stoned to death like Stephen or thrown in jail like Peter but it may earn you some sideways glances and strange looks. It means loving family and friends in a healthy, wholesome, selfless way because God's love has taught us how to love. It means being able to say – and truly knowing it to be true – that we love God above all else. It means saying and truly believing we live among equals – poor people, immigrants, white or people of colour, gay or straight – we are all made from the same clay. It means dropping your fishing net when Jesus says, "Follow me" not turning away from him sadly like the rich young man who couldn't part with his stuff.

If it sounds like a tall order – it's because it is. It's not an easy way to live and it's not an easy message to proclaim. The CEO making big bucks ruthlessly stripping the earth of its resources doesn't want to hear it. The CEO increasing her income by keeping low the income of her employees doesn't want to hear it. Your friend down the street who always brags about her accomplishments doesn't want to hear it. And the list goes on. Even we don't want to hear our message sometimes because it makes us uncomfortable to know we don't measure up – not yet. Our goal as Christians is to always be striving toward the perfection of Christ – to live in our lives what we profess with our lips.

To be always striving towards embodying in our lives the message of faith and love that we say we have, leads us into the other virtues that Jesus has listed – the virtues of those who are blessed:

The peacemakers – those who bring the peace of Christ to the world, a peace born of love, a reconciliation of equals.

The pure in heart – not the perfect in heart – the pure in heart...those turned toward God, clothed in Christ and forming themselves to be more and more like Christ.

Those who hunger and thirst for righteousness – the ones who actively seek to align their desires with what God desires.

The meek – those who know we all fall short, continuously stumbling on our way but forgiven already.

Those who mourn – people saddened by the brokenness of the world and its creatures and by their own brokenness yet comforted with the knowledge that we are all being pulled by the Holy Spirit toward our intended perfection.

The poor in Spirit – the ones who know that “going it alone” is fruitless. Those who know that true joy requires God, know that with God all things are possible and place their lives in God’s hands.

Understanding of these beatitudes flows from right understanding of the cross. Jesus taught with the knowledge that he would die – he would be persecuted and he would be put to death. His suffering and death was for justice. “The shame and pain of the cross were the price Jesus paid for breaking rules, siding with the least and the destitute, getting in the face of the powerful, and above all, letting the religious hypocrites [] of his day have the full measure of his contempt for them (Oliver, A House of Meanings, 28). This is the message he proclaimed. And he did this for love.

Let us love him in return.