

As I watched the news last night I thought about our gospel reading for today: the Lucan version of the Beatitudes. I saw sad and frightening scenes in Indonesia where Mt. Merapi is erupting, and in Port-au-Prince, Haiti where the hurricane recently came through two days ago. There are many, many people who are poor, hungry, crowded, wet, and mourning today. I am glad to know that they are blessed by God.

Luke's version of the blessings and woes are spare and edgy. The Beatitudes we are more accustomed to hearing in the Gospel of Matthew seem gentler, kinder. Jesus says, "Blessed are the poor in Spirit", in the Matthean Sermon on the Mount. In Luke's, Jesus says, "Blessed are the poor." In Matthew, "Blessed are they that hunger and thirst for righteousness." Luke's just says, "Blessed are the hungry." In other words, Matthew's version is much more metaphorical, or maybe gentle. We can all be hungry for righteousness, or for faith, or for justice, but I doubt that anyone here is literally, truly hungry. Even if we haven't had breakfast yet this morning, I imagine that we all had dinner last night.

So it seems as though Jesus is condemning us for our relative comfort in this Sermon on the Plain. Does God not love those of us who have 3 square meals, and a roof over our heads? Since that doesn't make much sense for God who is Good, let's think about what Jesus might really be saying with these blessings and woes.

For those who identify with the blessings, (which aren't like any blessings we are accustomed to), Jesus is saying, "Hang on, things will get better, and moreover, things are getting better – live in hope". And for those who identify with the woes, (which aren't what we would normally consider to be woeful), Jesus is saying, "Just remember, things may get tough, in fact, if you are human and live a good long life, things WILL get tough." We know that no one gets through this life without some suffering, but –live in faith.

And that is why Beatitudes are the appointed Gospel reading for all Saints Sunday.

The saints lived and live, in faith. Throughout their lives they kept the vision before them of what they had been called to do. When times were good, they were faithful. When times were bad, they were faithful.

That is practically the definition of a saint. And that's what we read in our new Episcopal book of the saints called *Holy Women and Holy Men*. It replaces our old book called *Lesser Feasts and Fasts* and contains the names of around 400 "saints" that we commemorate.

We **do** have saints in the Episcopal church, that's for sure! From Gregory the Great, to John Muir, to Vida Dutton Scudder, we have saints. It's just that many of our Anglican saints (or rather, holy men and women) would never have been able to make it to official sainthood in the Roman Catholic Church. Our criteria are a bit different, but in essence the same. These holy people were extraordinary people devoted to God in extraordinary ways.

One saint that I have always admired would have celebrated her hundredth birthday this year - Mother Teresa of Calcutta. She is actually not in our book. She is not Anglican, but we won't hold that against her. She is also not a saint, technically, yet. She has been beatified, but not yet canonized. Nevertheless, she is a marvelous example of a saint for us because of her dedication and devotion, **and** because of her doubts and fears. For me she is a saint I can believe in because she is real, and she is imperfect, as all of us are.

Most of us are quite familiar with her life and works. She was born in 1910 in Macedonia. She became a nun in 1928 and went to Calcutta. In 1969 she was introduced to the world by being on the cover of Time Magazine and meeting with many dignitaries, officials, both famous and infamous. With her Missionaries of Charity she treated lepers, and those with AIDS who were dying, and took in orphans.

She was awarded the Nobel Peace Prize in 1979, and died full of years, in Calcutta in September of 1997. She was fast-tracked to sainthood by Pope John Paul II. But for sainthood in the Catholic Church one must have performed verifiable miracles. The Vatican has an involved and rigorous process for vetting miracles, and it was determined that one was attributable to her. A woman with a large tumor came to the Missionary sisters in 1999. Two years after her death. The Sisters prayed with her, and for her, by praying that Teresa intercede with God. The tumor is said to have disappeared within several hours. So, with one miracle under her metaphorical belt, she was beatified by Pope John Paul in 2003 in a huge mass in St. Peter's Square.

But for me her saintliness has nothing to do with whether she is beatified or canonized or just revered. It was when I read some of the letters she wrote that were revealed in a book published in 2007. The book is entitled *Mother Teresa: Come Be my Light*. It was written by Fr. Brian, Teresa's biographer for potential canonization. It contains letters that don't seem to have been written by a saint, but just an ordinary person like you and me. Teresa had been encouraged to write to Jesus and describe to him her anguish, her fear, and her devotion. She did. We had thought that she was always faithful and cheerful in spite of all the pain and death that surrounded her. But clearly her work took a toll on her.

"The most astonishing revelation was that almost from the moment she began ministering personally to the poorest in 1948 until her death 49 years later, ... Teresa was utterly unable to feel the presence of God in her life. As [her confessor] put it; 'Neither in her heart nor in the Eucharist.'"ⁱ

This revelation caused many to wonder if Teresa was really a saint. But for me, I was oddly relieved to know that even those who are perfectly selfless and giving, can have doubts.

Wouldn't you know that Paul, back in the first century, knew that Christians were struggling with this same thing. How can we call ourselves true Christians and yet be so imperfect? The people of Ephesus must have felt this way. We know Paul struggled with this too. But he encouraged them then, and so we hear now, that because we have been given the gift of the Holy Spirit, we have a pledge of our inheritance with the saints. We will be redeemed, and we **are** redeemed as God's own people. In other words, we are saints in training.

This is the hope to which we are called.

It is not about how many good deeds we have done, and miracles we have performed. Instead it is all about being who God has called us to be, here and now. God is not keeping a scorecard in heaven, but God has given us grace to use our gifts to the best of our abilities.

We can all make a decision to let that inheritance, the gift of God's Spirit within us, shape our lives, and determine who we will be. As we go forward we will be paradoxically blessed with hunger, with mourning, and we will paradoxically know the woe of plenty, and the woe of joy in our lives. They should not keep us from our call. They did not deter Teresa from her call.

So, Jesus is not condemning us in the Lucan beatitudes. He is commending us and sanctifying our lives, both the blessings and the woes.

Let us be commended as we renew our commendation of our loved ones, OUR saints, to the love and care of God. Let us pray:

Into your hands, O merciful Savior, we commend ourselves in life, and our loved ones who have died. Acknowledge, we humbly beseech you, sheep of your own fold, lambs of your own flock, sinners of your own redeeming. You have received us into the arms of your mercy, and you have received those we have loved into the blessed rest of everlasting peace, and into the glorious company of the saints in light. Amen

ⁱ Fr. Brian Kolodiejchuk, Time Magazine, *Mother Teresa at 100*, Time Inc. 2010, pg. 80.