

Homily
4OrdA.1.19.17
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What It Means to Be Poor in Spirit

Why did God send Jesus to earth in the form of a human being? What was his basic mission?

The whole purpose of the life of Jesus here on earth was to open the door, to make it possible, for all of humanity to share the divine life that Jesus shares with the Father and the Holy Spirit.

As Jesus said in John 10:10, "I came that they might have life, and have it more abundantly."

St. Paul puts it this way, in his Letter to the Galatians: "I live, no longer I, but Christ lives in me."

Jesus does not force anyone to except the divine life He offers us. We are free to accept or reject His offer. Most of us accept a portion of what Jesus offers. We're somewhere in the middle.

St. Paul says in 1 Corinthians that the ways of God seem like foolishness to the ordinary person. He says that God's wisdom is mysterious, hidden, hard to comprehend.

That is so true.

In our Gospel today, we have the words of Jesus in His first public speech at the beginning of His ministry. What He says is completely contrary to the way we humans normally think.

He makes it crystal clear that the attitudes and behavior he is promoting are very counter-cultural.

We have heard what we call the Beatitudes in today's Gospel many times: the poor in spirit have the kingdom of heaven, those who mourn will be comforted, the meek will inherit the earth, the merciful will be shown mercy, and so on.

I'd like to focus this evening on the first beatitude on the list: "Blessed are the poor in spirit, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven."

What does it mean to be "poor in spirit?"

The path to God, the path to the kingdom, is the path of humility and interior poverty.

We live in a culture where so much is measured by what we have, what we produce, what we accomplish.

I've been in a position for 13 years to read many resumes and job applications. By far the most common words, the most common phrase in these resumes is "multi-tasking."

Virtually every person says they're good at multi-tasking. They can do it all, do everything, and do everything well.

Is that really how we're supposed to live? Is this the way to experience the supernatural life that Jesus offers us?

No. Our busy-ness, the frenzy of modern life, our desire to achieve on so many fronts, just takes us farther from sharing God's divinity.

Contrast our modern style of living with what St. Paul says in 2 Corinthians 12:

"Therefore, that I might not become too elated (too proud of my accomplishments), a thorn in the flesh was given to me, an angel of Satan, to beat me, to keep me from being too elated. Three times, I begged the Lord about this, that it might leave me, but he said to me, 'My grace is sufficient for you, for power is made perfect in weakness.'"

Paul concludes this passage by saying, "Therefore I am content with my weaknesses, for when I am weak, then I am strong."

This means that our human strengths are fine, but it's our weakness that makes room for God to make up for what we cannot do on our own. Our personal inadequacy is what makes room for God's grace.

So if we are doing God's will, He will make up for whatever ability we lack. Our weakness becomes our strength, because it's our weakness that makes room for God's power.

The person who is poor in spirit realizes that he or she can do nothing without God, that our very existence is a gift, every breath is a gift. Our talent, whatever it might be, is a gift, and even our efforts to develop our talent depend on God's gifts and His grace.

In Isaiah 66:2, the Lord tells the prophet Isaiah, "This is the one whom I approve; the lowly and afflicted man who trembles at my word."

The person who is poor in spirit trembles at the word of God because he realizes he can't obey the word of God, he can't live it out, without God's grace. On his own, he has no chance.

Likewise, in Sirach 35:17, it says "The prayer of the lowly pierces the clouds; it does not rest till it reaches its goal."

The poor in spirit do not engage in false humility or wallow in self-pity. On the contrary, they find joy in acknowledging their dependency on God's grace and God's faithfulness in responding to their deepest needs.

I'll close with one of my favorite Psalms, Psalm 40:

"I waited, waited for the Lord; who bent down and heard my cry,
drew me out of the pit of destruction,
out of the mud of the swamp,
set my feet upon rock,
steadied my steps,
and put a new song in my mouth,
a hymn to our God.
Many shall look on in awe,
And they shall trust in the Lord."

Whether we know it or not, we're all crying, crying to know God, to experience His love and His grace in our lives. When we are poor in spirit, we'll know we're crying, we will reach out, and God, in His timing, will draw us out of the swamp, set our feet on solid rock and put a new song in our mouth, a new way of living that He has been saving for us.

You'll notice that for almost all of the beatitudes, Jesus uses the future tense. He says "They will be..."

But for those who are poor in spirit, He says theirs IS the kingdom of heaven. He uses the present tense.

We can experience the kingdom, the abundant life that Jesus offers us, right now. It's being poor in spirit that opens the door.