

The Beatitudes and Social Justice

Blessed are they who hunger and thirst for righteousness, for they will be satisfied. (Matthew 5:6)

With this beatitude, Jesus reminds us that to be a Christian is to be uncomfortable in this world. There is a danger of complacency in this English translation because the words “righteousness” and “satisfied” can be interpreted, even by the best of us and even unconsciously, as “self-righteousness” and “self satisfied.” Nothing could be farther from Jesus’ intent.

The Church interprets “righteousness” as “justice,” one of the cardinal virtues, and justice calls for right action, not self-satisfaction. The Catechism explains that “justice is the moral virtue that consists in the constant and firm will to give their due to God and neighbor” (1807). “To hunger and thirst for righteousness,” then, means to have a burning desire within you to seek justice. It is not an easy path. To seek justice requires that we set aside our prejudices, ideologies, preferences, comforts, and appetites (in other words, our will), in order to seek to do the will of God.

Fortunately for us, God’s will has been revealed through scripture and the tradition of the Church. God is love, and it is God’s will that we seek to be perfect in love. Numerous examples from the Bible and the lives of the saints show that in order to love like God, we must love our neighbor more than we love ourselves—and who are our neighbors? They are the poor, the vulnerable, the weak and marginalized, those whom the world has abandoned and left to fend for themselves. In Isaiah 58 the Lord instructs Isaiah to condemn the hypocritical fasting practices of those who “fast only to quarrel and fight and to strike with a wicked fist!” (4). God tells the people that the fast he desires from them is not grudging self affliction, but rather “breaking off every yoke [,] sharing your bread with the hungry, bringing the afflicted and the homeless into your house [and] clothing the naked when you see them” (6-7). In Matthew 25: 31-46, Jesus reiterates the words of his Father to Isaiah and doubles down on them. He identifies himself with the stranger, the hungry, the thirsty, the naked, the ill, and the imprisoned by declaring that “whatever you did for one of these least brothers of mine, you did for me” (40). Jesus makes care of the poor and vulnerable the key criterion for entrance into the kingdom of heaven.

It is in serving Christ in the weakest among us that we will be satisfied, but that satisfaction is not to be found on earth, but rather when we walk with God in heaven and hear him say “well done, good and faithful servant” (Matt 25:21). If we are honest with ourselves, our “hunger and thirst” for justice in this world will keep us dissatisfied as there is so much injustice surrounding us. This doesn’t mean that we should despair—far from it! We have great hope, and we are on a “satisfying” mission for God.

There is a temptation that is easy to fall into when contemplating this beatitude. We can develop an understanding of “righteousness” as purity of doctrine or liturgical practice. While right worship of the Lord is necessary and also a form of right action, it is too comfortable and not enough. St. John Chrysostom warns of this when he writes:

Do you wish to honor the body of Christ? Do not despise her when she is naked. Do not honor him here in the church building with silks, only to neglect him outside when he is suffering from cold and nakedness. For he who said, “This is my body,” is the same who said, “You saw me hungry and you did not give me to eat.” Feed the hungry and then come and decorate the table. The Temple of an afflicted person’s body is more precious than this temple. The body of Christ becomes for you an altar. It is more holy than the altar of stone on which you celebrate the holy sacrifice. You are able to contemplate this altar everywhere, in the street and in the open squares.

Written by Deacon Christopher Walchuk, Member of the Diocesan Social Concerns Committee.