

In today's Gospel we see how Jesus, after choosing his apostles on the mountain, comes down with them and stands on a level place. Like Moses, who descended the mountain to deliver God's word to his people, Jesus descends the mountain to announce his word. In the presence of the crowds, he addresses his disciples. He speaks the four beatitudes and the four woes. Each of the beatitudes is balanced with a warning

Blessed are you

Who are poor

Who are hungry

Who weep

Who are hated

Woe to you

Who are rich

Who are full

Who laugh

Who are honoured.

In the sermon Jesus tells the poor and the hungry, the mournful and the reviled, that the kingdom of God is for them. They have the first invitations to enter the kingdom: they are God's preferred people. Jesus later speaks of the kingdom in terms of a magnificent banquet where the guest list is composed of a human panorama of rejects. The banquet in the kingdom is for the forgotten people, the ones most precious in the eyes of God.

In the upside-down kingdom of Jesus, which had more affinity with the world of the fairy tale than the world of conventional wisdom, it is the eldest son, the one who has everything going for him, the one who inherits the earth's bounty, who is rich and highly regarded, who ends up with empty hands. It is the youngest son, the one who is the summary of weakness, the one with the least going for him, who

is forced to rely on any help that comes his way, who eventually inherits the kingdom.

In the Gospel and the fairy tale, it is the reject, the forgotten one, the despised one, who eventually find rest – like poor Lazarus who, after a lifetime of being ignored, ends up in the bosom of Abraham to live happily ever after.

In his sermon Jesus does not give a blanket support to poverty, weeping, hunger and hurt: these are not desirable states to be sought after, and only a masochist would argue otherwise. As Archbishop Helder Canara commented: “Saints may be found in slums, but we cannot retain slums in order to make them the breeding ground of saints.” Destitute poverty is not a condition to be sought after, it is a condition to be avoided; it deprives human beings of their basic dignity. That said, it still remains true that Jesus preference for the poor has a social basis.

The best commentary on Jesus’ sermon is Jesus’ own life. Jesus did not live his life *as if* he was blessed by God; he lived out his life in the constant awareness that God *did* indeed bless him. In the course of that life he experienced poverty, not only the poverty of deprivation, but the poverty of standing alone against the crowds, the poverty of total reliance on his Father. He experienced hunger, not just the hunger that can be answered by bread, but the hunger that can only be satisfied by doing what is right. He had reason to weep and mourn not only at the loss of a dear friend but at the lost opportunities of his own people. He was no stranger to being held up as a clown for the amusement of all; he knew the experience of rejection, betrayal and abandonment.

All this was experienced by Jesus in the course of his mission.; it wasn’t adopted as some precious theological posture. It was the *outcome* of a life dedicated to God.

The Beatitudes are not prescriptions for becoming poor or hungry or mournful or afflicted. They are addressed to those who are already involved in committing themselves to the kingdom, and they give instances of what happens when the kingdom arrives in this broken world. They speak of a variety of experiences that people go through as a *result* of getting involved in God’s way of doing things. So, there is the promise that God can handle the poverty, the hunger, the tears, the rejection.

The promise is that God handles all these things, lifting his people *out of them*. That is the Good News. God is not committed to keeping his people at the level of being hurt and wounded – if that were true the beatitude would read, “Blessed are you who weep, for you shall weep even more.” The vision of the God of the beatitudes is the vision of a generous God, one who reverses the tragedy. “Blessed are you who weep” is the tragedy; “for you shall laugh” is the comedy. And it is the comedy, not the tragedy, which is the promise.