

## Happy Those who...Put Their Trust in the Lord

We have a convention on meeting, don't we, where we greet the other person and then we say something like "how are you?" Or "how are things?" And we usually just expect them to say "fine" and then we move on to other things. But every so often someone will say in reply to our "how are you?" "not so good". This shocks us because we don't actually expect it. We then have to change gear mentally to ask them what's wrong. Now suppose someone went on to tell you that they'd just lost their job, the dog had died, their wife had left them, their children had embarked on a life of crime, the neighbours were ganging up to drive you out of the street and they had nothing to eat and no money to buy food. You would probably be very concerned and you would clear a mental space to give them time and to listen to them and offer help. The last thing you are likely to say is "Lucky you! You must be delighted!" Yet this is what Jesus seems to be saying, in effect, in today's Gospel in what are sometimes called the Beatitudes.

"Happy are you who are poor!" He says. What! What is there about poverty to make anyone happy?

"Happy are you who are hungry!" I don't believe this. How can hunger possibly be something to celebrate?

"Happy you who weep now!" This is surely perverse. I've heard of people crying for joy, but that's not what is meant here.

"Happy are you when people hate you, drive you out, abuse you, denounce your name as criminal..." Really? What on earth is there in such human suffering and rejection to be happy about? Yet this is what Jesus seems to be saying in today's Gospel. What on earth can he mean by it?

Sometimes Jesus sets out deliberately to shock and challenge his audience. Perhaps it was a warm afternoon and people were nodding off under the olive trees up there on the shore of the Sea of Galilee and he wanted to jolt them all awake. Certainly his words are calculated to make people think: "what!! Rejoice in your sufferings? Make a virtue of being poor, hated, hungry and sad! The man must be mad!" And yet, this is precisely what Jesus is saying.

All of us, at some time in our lives, suffer these and other setbacks and trials. There is no way of protecting ourselves from them. Some people think that money will be the answer to all their problems. Others think that if only they were in another job or lived in another neighbourhood they could be really happy. Jesus is saying here that this is moonshine. It doesn't work. Get real! We all know this; the evidence is there. People think that if only they could win the lottery they could give up that job they hate, move to the Bahamas and spend the rest of their lives sipping Daiquiris with the beautiful people under palm trees on a sun soaked beach and everything would be heaven.

Rubbish!! And we all know it. We've all heard of the lottery winners who have blown it all on wine, gambling, sex and the playboy lifestyle whose marriages have broken down, who have become alienated from their families and ended up in the courts fighting battles over the spoils and losing all they have left in legal fees.

Who was happier, Ebenezer Scrooge or Bob Cratchit? This is the point Jesus is making in the Gospel. True happiness has nothing to do with your bank balance. It is a state of mind.

There was a gruesome documentary on the television some time ago about a woman who weighed 40 stone. Not surprisingly she was deeply depressed and hated herself. She knew that if she could lose weight everything would be all right. So, with great willpower and determination, she had jaws wired together, had operations to remove excess flesh and resorted to all sorts of revolutionary treatments and, over a period of a couple of years, she managed to get down to 12 stone. She bought beautiful clothes, was slim and good-looking once again. But was she happy now? Was she any the less depressed? Of course you know the answer. No, she was not because the demons that made her think she was worthless and unlovable when she was fat were still with her now and she felt no different, no less depressed, no less miserable.

True beatitude is not to be found in being as slender as Kate Moss, as beautiful as Cameron Diaz, as wealthy as Bill Gates, as powerful as Donald Trump or as famous as Kim Kardashian. Money, fame, power, fine food and designer clothes, a perfect figure and a villa in Marbella - none of these things can bring true happiness. True happiness, true beatitude is a state of the soul; it can only come from placing your trust in God and in God alone.

This is the point Jesus is making so powerfully in the Gospel today. The poor, the hungry, the sad and the reviled are fortunate precisely because they cannot put their trust in these false friends, these passing material things. They have nowhere to put their trust but in God and this is what makes them blessed. This why they are the happiest of people. Jeremiah makes the same point in the first reading today:

A curse on the man who puts his trust in man...He is like dry scrub in the wastelands...A blessing on the man who puts his trust in the Lord, with the Lord for his hope. He is like a tree by the waterside that thrusts its roots into the stream.

St Francis of Sales has this lovely image to describe the need to place our trust in God alone:

In all your affairs, rely wholly on God's Providence...imitate little children, who with one hand hold fast to their Father, and with the other hand gather strawberries or blackberries along the hedges. So too, as you gather and handle the goods of the world with one hand, you must with the other always hold fast the hand of your heavenly Father, turning yourself towards him from time to time to see if your actions or occupations be pleasing to him. Above all things, take heed that you never leave his hand or think to gather more or to gain some advantage. For, should you let go, you will not be able to go a step further without falling to the ground.

Life for the Christian is walking hand in hand with God in total trust that he will never let us go. If we so choose, we can let go, for God always leaves us free, but heed St Francis' warning: without God's guidance we are bound to fall. But, upheld by God's loving hand, we shall never stumble and fall even if we are hungry, or thirsty, sad or poor. God is all we need and he gives us all we need to be happy, if we only have faith for, as the psalm tells us, "happy is the man who has placed his trust in the Lord."