

Blessed are the . . . Poor?

6th Sunday in Ordinary Time – Year C

By: Fr. David

Have you ever had a night when you couldn't sleep and instead of doing the smart thing of picking up a book and reading, instead you turn on the TV and start watching a late-night televangelist with a southern accent tell you about Jesus?

Now I haven't done that for a long time, but I do remember one late night televangelist from when I was in high school. I don't remember his name, but I remember that he always promoted his green prosperity cloth. It was a green handkerchief a little larger than your hand. Whenever this man would preach, he would wave it around say that Jesus wants to perform miracles through this cloth. And he would always end by telling people to call the number on the bottom of the screen and buy his prosperity cloth. Then there would be testimonials of people who had bought the cloth. They would say, "I bought the cloth and after that I found a job." Or, "I bought the cloth and after that I got a raise at my job." Some even said that they bought the cloth and money just randomly came in the mail. At the end of the day, this televangelist's message was simple: Jesus wants you to be rich and happy and all you need to do to pray to him . . . and buy my green prosperity cloth.

Later in life I learned that this man was just one of many preachers who promoted an interpretation of scripture called the prosperity gospel, which basically teaches that those who believe and follow Jesus will become rich.

Now, my memory of this televangelist was struck this week because in our gospel Jesus begins to teach his disciples, and the first thing he says to them is, "Blessed are you who are poor for the kingdom of God is yours."

For the televangelist, blessings came in the form of riches. But it seems for Jesus that blessings come in the form of poverty.

So the first thing to take away is that this televangelist is not preaching the Gospel of Jesus Christ. So if you ever hear him or anyone else say, "Jesus wants to make you rich . . . and give me money, don't do it.

But the second and more important thing to take away is that as we continue living our Christian life, our aim should not be to get rich, but rather to get poor. Being rich is not a blessing. In fact, Jesus has some harsh words about being rich. Rather, it is the poor who are blessed.

There is a story that was told the at my seminary in Toronto, St. Augustine's, about the person who donated the money to build it. His name was Eugene O'Keefe, and he was a wealthy man who had made most of his money brewing beer. If you have ever head of O'Keefe Ale, that is him.

Well, back in 1916 it was announced that Toronto needed a seminary and so he said that he would donate a good portion of the money to build it. It turned out that after they had started building it, but before it was finished Mr. O'Keefe died, so he never got to see the fruit of his generosity. But what was more striking is that after he died when layers opened up his will they learned that this man whom everyone thought was rich actually had no money left in his bank account. He had given it all away. He was a rich man while he lived, but he died a poor man.

Jesus told his disciples that it is a blessing to be poor. Eugene O'Keefe understood that and so he strived to become poor.

Now at this point, you may wonder what is so good about being poor. I mean, aren't we trying to fight poverty? That is a good question and one that we do need to clarify.

When Jesus speaks about being poor, he is not talking about abject poverty where people are starving with no food and freezing with no shelter. That form of poverty we do need to fight against; that is a Christian duty.

The poverty Jesus speaks of is that after our basic need are met we don't need much more to be happy. And Jesus declares that type of poverty to be a blessing because God knows that when there are fewer distractions in life we focus on the most important things: God, family and friends. If you look at poorer

countries than ours you see a stronger connection among families. They have more time and energy for worship of God, at church and in their homes, and they are more connected with the people around them, the people that live beside them. That is because they are not distracted by all the things they can do with their abundant wealth.

And deep down we know that living like we are poor is a blessing. Think of all your most treasured memories, I mean the ones that you will never forget. How much did they cost?

So today Jesus is calling us to change the way in which we live our lives. He wants us to become poor. Whether he wants us to give away all our excess money, (which he may be calling a few of you to do, but don't do it hastily), or whether he wants us to start living more simply, to stop spending our money on things we don't need and to start dedicating that time and mental energy to the things that matter, whether he is calling us to one or the other he is calling all of us to be poor.