

In today's gospel we heard the opening part of the Sermon on the Mount: the Beatitudes. We are only going to look at a couple of these, starting, appropriately, with the first one: "Blessed are the poor in spirit for theirs is the kingdom of heaven." What does poorness of spirit look like? Here is a description: "Jesus, though he was in the form of God, did not regard equality with God something to be grasped at. Rather, he emptied himself taking the form of a slave, coming in human likeness; and found human in appearance, he humbled himself, becoming obedient to death, even death on a cross. Because of this, God greatly exalted him and bestowed on him the name, that is above every name, that at the name of Jesus every knee should bend, of those in heaven and on earth and under the earth, and every tongue confess that Jesus Christ is Lord, to the glory of God the Father." Jesus—of course is the perfect model of poorness of spirit.

Poorness of spirit is the condition necessary for the rest of the beatitudes to fall into place. Poorness of spirit can be understood as being completely open to the will of God. The spirit which we should be poor in is the spirit of the world which has been corrupted by sin. The spirit of the world tells us to put ourselves first, to get as much money and power as we can, to insist on having things our way instead of God's way. That does not describe Jesus. Neither does it describe his Blessed Mother. Mary was poor in the spirit of the world which allowed her to be filled with the Spirit of God. If we want to be rich in the spirit of God like Mary, we have to become poor in the spirit of the world.

Are the Beatitudes present or future tense? They are both. They promise blessedness in heaven but they also have a more immediate meaning. With the first one "blessed are the poor in spirit for theirs IS the kingdom of heaven," Pope Benedict XVI, in part one of his trilogy, Jesus of Nazareth, wrote: "When man begins to see and to live from God's perspective, when he is a companion on Jesus' way, then he lives by new standards, and something of the reality to come is already present. Jesus brings joy in the midst of affliction." Seeing things from God's point of view instead of the world's view changes our perspective and we can have the peace of the kingdom of heaven within our hearts.

The beatitudes, and the people who authentically try to live them out, are the means through which Jesus works to reverse everything wrong in the world and restore it to the way God originally intended it to be. When we look at the world, perhaps it seems as if this plan isn't working out very well. I am going to propose a couple of reasons for this. First, the spirit of the beatitudes is contrary to the spirit of the world held captive by sin. The reversal which Jesus is working

alongside and through us to accomplish is going to be resisted by Satan and his demonic and human minions. They will do everything they can to keep things upside down and in a state of disorder and chaos.

The second reason why this plan seems to be falling apart has to do with that immediate nature of the beatitudes to which Pope Benedict referred. Let's look at the second Beatitude: Blessed are those who mourn for they will be comforted. Mourning can mean sorrow at the evil we see in the world around us right now. How do we respond to that evil? If we truly mourn injustice and hatred and violence and everything else that does not belong in God's good creation we will work to get rid of it. Through our actions we will provide comfort to those who are suffering the injustices and, knowing that we are doing what we can to help them, we also will experience some level of comfort. On the other hand, if we are grieved by evil and can do something to fight it, but don't, do we not then share responsibility for the continued existence of that evil? If we can act, but don't, we cannot help Jesus spread the kingdom of God and the world will keep getting worse until Jesus comes back and fixes it himself.

When we look at the world and see things falling apart and then when we look at ourselves, we must ask ourselves "Whose spirit am I full of?" To be counted among the blessed, we must be poor in the spirit of the world so that we can become rich in the spirit of God. Before he became Pope Benedict, Cardinal Joseph Ratzinger was asked what he thought the church would look like several decades down the road. He said that the church would be smaller, poorer, but more fervent. He was speaking of a remnant, similar to what we heard in the first reading: a humble and poor people who were on fire for God. We may be part of the fulfillment of Zephaniah's fervent remnant, but if we are fervent for the wrong things, if we are filled with the spirit of the world, it will be more difficult for God to work through us.

We are a mere sixty-three days away from Easter. On the traditional liturgical calendar, that means we have entered into a new liturgical season called Septuagesima. That season lasts for 17 days and is a period for us to prepare to enter into Lent. Take advantage of this time. Let us make ourselves poor in the spirit of the world, poor in the spirit of politics and destructive ideologies, poor in the spirit of celebrity worship, poor in the spirit of our own self-importance so that we can become rich in the spirit of God. Let us become the fervent remnant from which God will build up his chosen people. Let us truly be known as the people of the Beatitudes.