

Blessed are the Poor
All Saints Sunday
November 2, 2008

If I were to ask you the definition of a saint, you might say a person who is extraordinary in loving God, in serving Christ, a person full of the Holy Spirit, remarkable in their sacrifice. Above all, a person who follows Jesus and is an example for us all. But, is it easy to know how to follow Jesus?

The recent issue (November 4, 2008) of *Christian Century* poses the question: “Which Jesus?: The search for a scholarly consensus.” Written by Beverly Roberts Gaventa and Richard B. Hayes, of Princeton Theological seminary and Duke Divinity School. The article traces the many even bewilderingly diverse views about Jesus over the centuries. These include Jesus as a quietist personal savior who “offers individuals forgiveness of sins, a close relationship with a loving God and assurance of heaven.” In the early part of this century, Jesus “became deeply enmeshed in conservative politics and nationalism....serving as a spokesperson for family values, capitalist economics and a strong national defense policy.” Jesus at the same time was linked to the prosperity Gospel; a person who will ensure abundance...There is the very different Jesus of liberation theology, who is on the side of the oppressed and poor. And, Jesus of *The Da Vinci Code*, married to Mary Magdalene and having children with her. And, the Jesus of *The Passion of the Christ*, who is “neither teacher nor healer but the passive victim of seemingly arbitrary and unending physical torture, which is somehow redemptive.” (all quotes pp. 27-8)

With these very different views, how do we come to understand Jesus? And, if it is difficult to understand him, how can we possibly follow?

The scholars did come to a consensus: Jesus of Nazareth was a Jew. The identity of Jesus is reliable attested and known in the scripture of the Old and New Testaments. In order to understand the identity of Jesus rightly, the church must constantly engage in the practice of deep, sustained reading of these texts, as well as the understanding of Jesus throughout Christian history. Jesus is not dead; he lives. Because Jesus remains a living presence, he can be encountered in the community of his people, the body of Christ. Jesus is a disturbing, destabilizing figure; finally, the identity of Jesus is something that must be learned through long-term discipline.

An even simpler summary of Jesus’ identity is the Beatitudes. One extremely useful and beautiful two-volume commentary on Matthew by Frederick Dale Bruner (*Matthew, a Commentary*, Eerdmans, 1990) calls the Beatitudes “the most important words ever written.”

The Beatitudes are baffling, mysterious, completely counter-intuitive and so countercultural. They help us understand who are the saints; the unsung saints.

The first Beatitude, Blessed are the poor, could be the title for the whole.

Blessed are the poor, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven. Who are the poor? Matthew writes of the poor in spirit, as blessed; Luke, simply, uses the phrase “the poor.” Who are these people? those who are so down and out that they are at the end of their resources; they are on the margin, physically and socially and spiritually. . Those who would despair of any future better than the debilitating suffering in which they barely live.

The earthquake victims in Pakistan, the proud and hospitable Palestinians who lost their homes and during the founding of the state of and for sixty years have lived in squalid camps; the people in Brazil, especially rail thin women and children who scavenge garbage dumps to keep alive.

They are blessed. They will be blessed. Because Jesus is especially with them.

What can this mean?

Fr. Elias Chacour, who will speak at St. Michael’s on Monday, whose family lost everything during the founding of the state of Israel, is a reliable guide. I just finished reading his book, *Blood Brothers*. He has meditated on the Beatitudes his whole life, guided by his father’s example. Their homes taken and bombed, their fig groves taken over by the Israeli government, still his father, kept the Beatitudes central to his life, who with several sons was kidnapped by the Israelis, for three months; yet he always returned peace and forgiveness for violence, always taught his children that retaliation is not God’s way; always to trust entirely in God. In his first Palestinian parish, the people, oppressed and poor, were angry at each other. Fr. Chacour padlocked them inside the church with him one Sunday, following his short sermon and said to them: “You can either kill each other or be reconciled.” They began to ask each other for forgiveness; they rebuilt the church and the community.

The first three beatitudes as passive (stick figure image—the figure is on the ground, reaching arms up for mercy): we don’t pray for or wish for others that they are poor, brokenhearted, or the little people of the earth. People find themselves in these positions. Nor are we to pray to be poor in spirit; because if we pray for something we feel that we have achieved it. Those who are blessed seemingly are people who despair that they follow God in Christ or have anything to offer to the world.

They are blessed. Because Jesus is with them.

There is no way to understand this first Beatitude except by paradox. This does not mean that we should not grow spiritually, or help others out of poverty, or help people organize for a better life. It says much more about Jesus than about us. Jesus is with those who have nothing because that is who Jesus is. It is Jesus who creates saints.

The second Beatitude, Blessed are the grieving, because they shall be comforted; blessed are you who have lost loved ones. You are closer to God now than at any other time. What a consolation you have if Jesus consoles you!

Blessed are the meek: *anawim*; little people; having encountered full misfortune, they shall inherit the earth. This third Beatitude says that it is just to the unaggressive that God gives the beautiful, green earth. Empty people, failures, receive the earth! Sometimes we are like this. [Woody Allen says: “Most of the time I’m not having very much fun. The rest of the time I’m not having any fun at all.”] We don’t wish this on anyone but are asked to bear it with poise when it comes to us.

The fourth Beatitude: Blessed are those who hunger and thirst, for themselves and others, for they shall be satisfied. Blessed are those who seek for social justice, the prophetic requirement/insight that rightness with God brings a passion for social justice.

“The first two Beatitudes cannot be prayed for...The Third—the gentle kindness of little people—can be. The fourth—passion for righteousness and justice—must be.”(p. 171)

What is a saint? The person who lives the beatitudes, the person who loves neighbor as self; even the neighbor on the margins, who has little or nothing; the person who understands that we are all knit together. We might well all memorize the Beatitudes, teach them to our children as important as the Lord’s Prayer.

The Spirit of Jesus, completely countercultural and counterintuitive, is so surprising as to take our normal understandings and turn them upside down, will over time...make us more like him, even if we don’t understand it.

Sojourner’s Magazine, the well-respected magazine of the Christian organization, Sojourners, has as its mission “to articulate the biblical call to social justice, inspiring hope and building a movement to transform individuals, communities the church and the world.”

Aware of the first four beatitudes, and aware of the importance of this coming election Tuesday, I’d like to summarize their list of principles or values they encourage their readers to embrace: Our world is vastly different from Jesus’ and yet is it? And, is not Jesus’ message timeless and true for every place and age? And, are not we to ask what it means for us?

Here is a list from *Sojourners*, which I think tries to reflect Jesus’ kingdom, his concern with those on the underside, and his preaching that in him, God’s kingdom is breaking into our world: He invites us to be part of that inbreaking kingdom:

- Work must work and provide for family economic success and security.
- Children should not be poor.
- Extreme global poverty must end.
- Bring peace to Iraq.

- Eliminate nuclear weapons and reduce military spending
- Support security and freedom in the Middle East
- Strengthen the United Nations and international law to fight terrorism.
- Stop genocide
- Reverse racial disparities.
- End environmental racism.
- Establish humane and holistic immigration policies
- End torture worldwide.
- Stop human trafficking, promote religious freedom, fight HIV/AIDS, and defend the rights of women
- Strengthen marriage and families
- Restore integrity to our civic and business practices
- Prevent violence
- Reverse global climate change
- Prioritize clean air and water
- Develop clean and renewable energy.

Vote your hearts and your minds, and your Christian conscience.
Know the challenge and comfort of Jesus, so that you may sing:

“When peace, like a river, attendeth my way,/When sorrows like sea billows roll;
Whatever my lot, Thou has taught me to say, It is well, it is well, with my soul.”

Amen.