

Homily for September 11, 2019
Wednesday 23 Week of Ordinary Time

In the Epistle for this morning St. Paul talks about how our life from the perspective of the Resurrection of Jesus Christ. Because we belong to the body of Christ, the Church, we truly share in Jesus' life now. We are to live in the present so that the values of heaven influence our everyday experience.

But how hard this is for us to do. The simple fact of the matter is that on account of the mysterious curvature of the will that we call original sin, we deviate from the very actions and attitudes that will allow us now to share in the life of heaven. In the elegant formulation of Saint Augustine, we have turned from the Creator to creatures, and as a result we are wandering in "the land of unlikeness," which is to say, a place of spiritual aridity.

Jesus in today's gospel recommends a series of negative prescriptions, designed to orient us wanderers aright. One of the most fundamental problems in the spiritual order is that we sense within ourselves the hunger for God, but we attempt to satisfy it with some created good that is less than God. Thomas Aquinas said that the four typical substitutes for God are wealth, pleasure, power, and honour. Sensing the void within, we attempt to fill it up with some combination of these four things, but only by emptying out the self in love can we make the space for God to fill us.

The classical tradition referred to this errant desire as "concupiscence," but I believe that we could neatly express the same idea with the more contemporary term "addiction." When we try to satisfy the hunger for God with something less than God, we will naturally be frustrated, and then in our frustration, we will convince ourselves that we need more of that finite good, so we will struggle to achieve it, only to find ourselves again, necessarily, dissatisfied. At this point, a sort of spiritual panic sets in, and we can find ourselves turning obsessively around this creaturely good that can never in principle make us happy.¹

So think about each of the beatitudes through the lens of addiction and the substitutes of wealth, pleasure, power, and honour.

Blessed are you who are poor now; or blessed are you who are not addicted to material possessions but are learning to practice the way of detachment to material things. How free you will be to pursue God and his kingdom.

Blessed are you who are hungry now; or blessed are you who are not addicted to the need for pleasure at all costs. For when you live a life centred on holiness and virtue you can grow in practising self-denial and temperance.

Blessed are you who weep now; or blessed are you who are not addicted to power and always needing to feel that you are in control. When you can let go and let God there is an interior space that can allow for joy to well up from the inside out.

Blessed are you who when people hate you, or blessed are you when you are not addicted to the need for honour and approval. You will discover the pleasure that comes from knowing the approval of the Lord rather than the approval of people.

How many people devote their lives to the pursuit of wealth, power, pleasure and honour. As Jesus goes on to say, if this is what we base our lives on we may in the present be wealthy, powerful, experience much pleasure and honour, but these are not values to build a life on.

Today's Collect summarizes succinctly today's theme:

O God the protector of those who hope in you, without whom nothing has a firm foundation, nothing is holy....and grant that with you as your ruler and guide, we may use the good things that pass in such a way as to hold fast even now to those that endure.