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The Beatitudes as Challenge

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Fourth Sunday in Ordinary Time
Sunday Readings for January 30, 2011 for Cycle A:
Zep 2:3; 3:12-13; Ps 146: I Cor 1:26-31; Mt 5:1-12

THE BEATITUDES AS CHALLENGE

Lawrence E. Frizzell

Few texts of the Gospel are as well-known as Matthew's version of the Beatitudes, but are they well understood? The German philosopher Friedrich Nietzsche (1844-1900) was repelled by this evidence that Christianity engenders a "slave mentality". Marxists, who cannot be expected to know that the phrase "kingdom of heaven" means "Kingdom of God," have stated that the poor are kept in subjugation because they hope for a "a pie in the sky by and by."

The Christian should reflect deeply upon the passage and upon the magnificent heritage that gave rise to it. While some may see that this introduction to the Sermon on the Mount contains the quintessential message of Jesus, they should realize that like any fine teacher, he is building upon what his listeners know, the work of Israel's great prophets, sages and psalmists.

It is God's will that every human being have the necessities of daily life and the means of exercising his or her inherent dignity. The tragedy of economic deprivation and its attendant experience of helplessness can usually be traced directly to the oppression that derives from human greed and other vices. Although extreme poverty is a negative experience, the person so afflicted can learn valuable lessons while striving to overcome it.

The teachers of Israel knew that all people come to know that their creaturehood implies emptiness. Some will try to fill this vacuum with a great variety of possessions, yet will never be able to fend off all of life's threats. Moreover, they will be increasingly uneasy in their riches. Loss can occur in so many ways! The biblical insight that creatures must invite God to fill this emptiness provides the antidote to both anxiety and idolatry. The poor will respond to the prophet Zephaniah's call: "Seek the Lord... seek justice, seek humility: (2:3). Will the "rich" even hear it?

Those who have grasped the meaning of being "poor in spirit" will be rewarded by the gifts that flow from the acknowledgment of God's presence in their lives. "The kingdom of heaven" is a phrase that involves a circumlocution because of Jewish reverence for God's name. They experience in faith the authority or reign of God over their lives now and respond to the gift of a richer life which perdures beyond the vicissitudes of time. Thus even in the emptiness of losing a loved one there will be consolation and comfort, especially when other people of faith share the bereavement. After all, they believe that in death of the body "life is changed, not taken away" (Preface of the Requiem Mass).

The beatitudes concerning righteousness and mercy are rooted in the call for this imitation of God that must be the response to the privilege of being created in the divine image. Each person should yearn for the right order in creation that is a reflection of God's righteousness or integrity. This
earnest pursuit of the ideal should be balanced by the facets of love that transform a world replete with failures. Those worthy of God's blessing must seek righteousness and the justice that flows from it just as one strives to overcome hunger and thirst in the natural order. However, they will not scorn those who have failed; knowing their own need of divine and human forgiveness, they will be merciful, forgiving and patient. Then the world will see some reflection of the divine attributes that reveal the meaning of God's Name (Ex 34: 6-7). These qualities bring healing to those threatened by a world whose standards contradict the laws of God (see Ps 146:5-9, the congregational response to the first reading).

No one who reads these beatitudes should think that Jesus teaches a merely passive submission to the cruelties and inequities of inhumane societies. Jesus is also well aware that this message of peacemaking will not be welcomed by those who have built their monuments of wealth and prestige by exploitation of others. Even in persecution the person and the community of faith will maintain ideals set forth in the Gospel. A human life may be snuffed out by violence but the true meaning of human existence will shine forth especially in those who were weak and defenseless yet who remained firm in faith. If on earth one identifies with the example of Jesus, the person is assured of the fuller life that is signified by the promises of the kingdom.