

All Saints

Luke 6.20-31

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Is there anywhere here who likes to be poor?

No fridge, no healthy food, only one pair of trousers and one T-shirt, no clean water, no schools for your kids.

1. Being poor is no blessing

“Blessed are you poor,” Jesus says.

But who wants to be poor. And what is blessed about being poor?

What is the advantage of not having a house, not having a fridge, not having money?

As a rule, I have found this to be true in Egypt, meeting with so many poor people, as a rule there is more real satisfaction in life in the humble apartment of the poor man than in the palaces of the rich.

But really poor, with no money and nothing to eat, is not a blessing but a curse.

“Neither give me poverty nor riches,” we read in the book of Proverbs. Do not give me poverty “lest I be poor and steal and profane the name of my God.”

Real poverty can make a person desperate; you do not wish that to anyone. So why does Jesus say that the poor are blessed?

It is important to notice that when He said this, He purposely looked at his disciples. Blessed are you who are poor.

Blessed are you, followers of Jesus, who are poor, who are hungry, who weep.

And the heart of the matter then follows; Jesus says:

Blessed are you when people hate you and when they exclude you and revile you and spurn your name as evil, on account of the Son of Man!

He speaks to his disciples who will be persecuted for following Jesus, and because of this persecution, they will sometimes be poor, hungry, tearful.

So the words of Jesus are in fact a prophecy. He predicts what would happen to his followers.



So why are the poor and hungry disciples blessed? Because it was a sign that they had made the right choices. They were following Jesus Christ, and that had consequences.

And of people who were rich, filled with food, laughing now and having a good life, Jesus said: “woe to you...”

And to people being seen as good guys by all others, Jesus said: “Woe to you...”

But again, he is not making general statements about how bad it is to have a good life. He actually speaks of people who have this good life because they are not prepared to show their commitment to Jesus Christ.

While the apostles and the early church were persecuted, many people made sure they kept their distance from those persecuted saints.

Imagine, if you would be seen to be their friends, you could also end up on the wrong side of the stick of the persecutors.

There are people who go through life with a smile, they never do anything that can make society, or their friends and their family upset. That is possible.

But not if you live committed to Jesus Christ and the lifestyle he asks of you.

People who choose to be known as Christians in public, are saints. They may pay a price for this commitment, but they gain much more.

“Yours is the kingdom of God; you shall be satisfied; you shall laugh; your reward is great in heaven.”

Today, on the day of All Saints, we remember with fondness those who went before us to be with Christ in heaven.

And we honour all those forgotten people who in their misery, in persecution, hunger, thirst, held onto Jesus Christ. Those who do so, are assured that He holds them eternally in his arms.

2. Critical look at ourselves

Looking with respect at persecuted Christians usually makes me feel a bit uneasy. What is the meaning, the depth, of my commitment to Christ, in my easy life?

In my middle class, well to do situation?

I have personally been confronted by so much poverty of others, by people who suffered for their Christian faith, by people who dared to be baptised, knowing how this could cost them their life.



And then look at us. Look at me.

I think it is good to often question our own stance. To look in the mirror of the bible, and in the mirror of the worldwide church. And to wonder...

Do I personally choose to be on the side of the saints, do I speak out for them, do I support other Christians? Do I make them my community of people?

Jesus says, If you give them a glass of cold water, if you give them food, if you visit them in prison, you do that to Me.

We are one church, one people. Any Christian who suffers for his faith, or who suffers extreme poverty in general - simply for being born in Pakistan, or in Congo, or in Egypt, any such Christian must make us feel their pain.

They are our people. Our saints. And what do we do?

To celebrate their lives once a year in a worship service is nice, but our Lord has higher expectations.

How do we align our lives with Jesus Christ and with his saints? With all people who serve Him, even when the cost is high?

First, we have to be clear where our own priorities lie. Is our Lord Jesus number one?

If we do this, we are - through Christ - automatically united with the suffering church.



For instance, with the Swiss missionary Beatrice Stöckli—she was kidnapped in Timbuktu, Mali in January 2016. And murdered a month ago by the al-Qaeda related group that held her for four years.

And we feel connected with that poor Christian woman in Pakistan who is forced to work in a stone factory.

We stand up for Christians who are persecuted, and for Christians who live in squalor.

As Christians we ought to have a natural empathy for poor and badly treated people, because our Lord Jesus Christ was treated badly.

So as church we cannot be too close to those in power. It goes against our faith, against our Lord, if we feel too comfortable with the rulers of our world.

Is our focus on being popular, or do we have a wider, more eternal, more divine view of life and of what is truly important?

I think for all of us, this is an ongoing struggle. We are so comfortable in our life, with our lifestyle, our jobs, our middle class society.

Justin Welby, our archbishop, said it well:

Christians, the servants of a vulnerable and poor Saviour, need to act to serve and love the poor; they need also to challenge the causes of poverty. ...

No society can be content where misery and want exist, unless through our love collectively we also challenge the greed and selfishness behind it.

For God, poor people count, because Jesus was poor and because often Christians are poor because of the Lord they follow.

If we try to be popular as a church, we should not talk too much about justice and poverty matters. But if we follow Christ and we stand up for what is right, we will be seen as very irritating.

That is the fate of the saints. Following Jesus Christ puts us on the wrong side of the equation for a society that wants to relax and enjoy and not worry too much about the rest of the world.

But to radically choose to be on the side of our fellow Christians, and of the poor and mistreated in general, is our choice for Jesus Christ.

3. Our behaviour

In his words to his disciples, Jesus is not proposing an unattainable ideal. No. Christian teaching in this regard is quite clear: what Christ commands, He commands in order to have us do what He says.

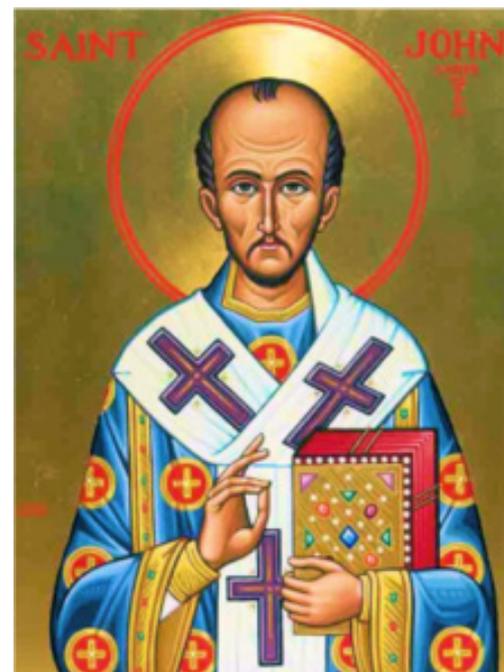
And thank God, along with His commandment comes grace to enable us to fulfil it. Therefore, every Christian is supposed to do, to live, the teachings of Christ. Not by our own efforts alone but by means of the grace which Christ has won for us.

St John Chrysostom spoke in a sermon about our need to help the poor. He pointed at the altar in his church, and said:

You honor indeed this altar, because it receives the body of Christ.

Then he pointed at some Christian beggars, and he said:

But him who is himself the body of Christ you treat with contempt and neglect. This altar [of the poor] you see everywhere, lying both in lanes and in market places, and you may sacrifice upon it every hour; for on this too is sacrifice performed.



When then you see a poor believer, think that you behold an altar: when you see such a beggar, not only insult him not, but even reverence him, and if you see another insulting him, interfere and stop it.

So St John Chrysostom told his congregations to stand against those who abuse the poor, and to support those who need help. That is what we are called to do. That is like sacrificing on the altar of God.

But Jesus made it even harder for us.

But I say to you who hear, Love your enemies, do good to those who hate you, 2bless those who curse you, pray for those who abuse you.

To one who strikes you on the cheek, offer the other also, and from one who takes away your cloak do not withhold your tunic either.

Give to everyone who begs from you, and from one who takes away your goods do not demand them back.

And as you wish that others would do to you, do so to them.

We do not only choose the side of the victims; we even love the victimiser. Imagine. We side with the Christians who are persecuted, but we also side with the persecutors, by blessing them, and loving them.

That is relatively easy to do if we are not directly involved. Love from a distance is easy. But if you are the one mistreated, and you face your nemesis, then this is totally different ballgame.



“Treat other people as you like to be treated”.
Even when they hurt you.

This is where the rubber hits the road. This is the high standard of Jesus. Jesus Christ teaches us by example. Even when nailed to the cross He prayed to His Father for those who had done this to Him:

Father, forgive them, for they know not what they do (Lk 23.34).

In imitation of the Master, St Stephen, the first martyr of the Church, when he was being stoned, prayed to our Lord: “Lord, do not hold this sin against them.”

People who pray like that, can move mountains. They are not weak by forgiving, but people of steel.

They are prepared to live by their faith in the Lord who could fight back, but who refused to do so. And He even refused hatred for evildoers to dominate his heart.

Our natural response to being treated badly, is revenge, hatred, anger, withdrawal.

But we are asked to always go the high way of Jesus.

To love your enemies is the most crazy, counterintuitive response to being treated badly.

But God is our Father; Jesus is our brother. They show the most amazing generosity to all people. And therefore we choose to be as generous as you would like other people to be to you.

Even when they treat you badly.

Conclusion

Let us be open handed, and not tight fisted. Always loving, always giving. Loving and giving to the poor. Loving and giving to the abusers.

We do not live for creating a legacy on earth; we live with the joy of God's eternal legacy in mind. By doing that we actually also connect with our beloved one's who have gone to be with the Lord.

That gives value to your life today. To follow Jesus, to be related to all his people, and to give, always to give.

+Amen