



Dear Folks,

In the beginning of the Sermon on the Mount in the Gospel of Matthew (the importance of which I cannot emphasize enough), Jesus starts by saying, “Blessed are the poor in spirit, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven (Matt 5:3).” If you ask a lot of Christians what that means, most will not have an answer.

Matthew 8, immediately after the Sermon on the Mount, begins with two healings. First is a leper. This guy was poor, absolutely poor. He could offer Jesus literally nothing in return for a favor. He has no money, no contacts, and couldn't even offer Him his coat if he had one (it would be infected). He was completely dependent on Jesus' mercy. The second miracle is the centurion's servant. This centurion was, in the world's terms, probably the richest, most powerful, most important person who had ever been in Capernaum. Furthermore, he had been good to the residents, and had built a very large synagogue (bigger than such a small community could normally afford), and so might easily be thinking that everyone in town owed him a favor. If anyone could be expected to approach Jesus with a sense of entitlement to special treatment, it was him. And yet we see the opposite. When Jesus says he will come and cure the servant, the centurion says, “Lord, I am not worthy to have you enter under my roof (Matt 8:8).” This is, perhaps, the greatest expression in the Bible, and we repeat it every Mass. He approached Jesus, not with a sense of entitlement, but of humility, as a beggar. He was not poor, but he was poor in spirit.

Contrast with Jesus' visit to the synagogue in Nazareth in Luke 4. The people there thought that since Jesus had grown up there, they were entitled to see some miracles. When Jesus told them they weren't they got quite nasty. When people approach Jesus with a sense of entitlement it does not go well.

Our Gospel today tells the story of a servant who had been plowing the field or tending sheep all day (Luke 17:7-10) comes home, and, instead of being able to relax and eat, still has to make and serve dinner for the master.

In C. S. Lewis' “The Screwtape Letters” he says, “Men are not angered by mere misfortune but by misfortune conceived as injury. And the sense of injury depends on the feeling that a legitimate claim has been denied (Letter 21).” We can believe that after all we have done and all we have suffered, we should have things go our way for a while, but things don't go as well. There is not just a sense of disappointment, but a sense that we have been wronged. Sometimes people do wrong us, but when there is nothing we can do to correct the situation, holding on to the resentment will harm and not help us. We recognize the truth, but must work toward healing.

We can feel wronged that God has not done what we wanted. We can decide we deserve better from God after all we have done and all we have gone through. We are all reminded today that however much we do for God, He doesn't owe us anything. Ephesians 2:1-10 makes that point very powerfully. If we worked 29 hours a day, 11 days a week 64 weeks a year for a million years, we could not earn a moment of heaven.

When we approach God, we are confident that he will respond because of His infinite love, not because we are entitled. A disciple does not tell God that we will follow so far and no farther, or we will follow only if our conditions are met. We do not know what discipleship will demand in the future, but we are called to follow wherever it leads. I find He will send some consolations and encouragements to keep us from getting totally discouraged, but not always when and how much we think He should.

We ask for the strength to follow without limits, and with a willing heart.

Blessings, Fr Jim