

6th Sunday in Ordinary Time
St. Mary Catholic Church, Richmond VA
Fr. Michael Renninger

Jason had just returned from Haiti. He is an emergency room doctor, and he went to Haiti with some other physicians after the earthquake in 2010.

You may remember that massive earthquake which hit Haiti. Hundreds of thousands were killed or injured.

For two weeks, Jason practiced what he called 'primitive medicine,' facing horrible injuries with almost no modern equipment.

He delivered a set of premature twins in a muddy tent. They both died. Jason said, "If these children had been born in the poorest hospital in America, they would have been saved. But, in Haiti, everything is turned upside down."

Jason later said to me: "What I saw in Haiti has changed my life. Because, when you see people whose lives have been turned upside down...you start to ask questions about what is really important in life."

Lives that are upside down...

In Luke's Gospel, Jesus preaches a message which is intended to turn the world upside down. We hear part of that world-changing sermon today. We call this section of his sermon the "Beatitudes."

Most of us have heard of the Beatitudes. Even non-believers know that Jesus said something like, "Blessed are the peacemakers."

We've heard Jesus's words before – but do we try to LIVE them? I think many of us try to sugar-coat and tame these Beatitudes, yet they still have the power to turn our world upside down, if we dare to listen and live them.

How would YOUR life change, today, if you really believed Jesus when he says:

"Blessed are you who are poor, for yours is the kingdom of heaven. Blessed are you who are hungry now...blessed are you who weep...blessed are you when people hate you."

And, how would your world be turned upside down, today, if you dared to listen to Jesus when he said, "Woe to you who are rich... woe to you who are filled now... woe to you who laugh now... woe to you when everyone speaks well of you..."

When Jesus first preached the Beatitudes, he overturned a thousand years of religious certainties.

For a long time, many Jewish people believed that wealth, health and power were all signs that God loved you (Come to think of it, that ancient message may be alive and well in some Christian TV preachers today!)

There were people, at the time of Jesus, who were convinced that sickness, suffering and poverty were all signs that you had disappointed God.

But as Jesus preaches these Beatitudes, he's overturning important assumptions that his contemporaries had about who God is, and how God works.

You can just picture the folks in that vast crowd, scratching their heads and saying, "Did I hear him right? Did he say that the poor are blessed? I thought poverty was God's punishment for laziness!

Did I hear him right? Did he say 'Woe to the rich?' I thought prosperity was sign of God's favor toward me!

Did I hear him say 'woe to you' who are full? I thought that God's abundance on my table was a sign that I had pleased God!"

And yet, they DID hear him right. Jesus knew that his words would turn the world upside down... if anyone would listen.

And, if anyone IS listening, his words COULD have the same effect today.

Yet, many people still worship at the altars of power, money, control, and instant gratification. We want it all and we want it now!

Then along comes Jesus, quietly happy to turn our world upside down, insisting that...

+ it is the poor, not the prosperous, who inherit the kingdom;

+ it is the weeping, not the wealthy, who hold a special place in God's heart;

+ it is the hungry, not 'the beautiful people,' who find real satisfaction;

+ it is the sick, the sinner, the outcast who find a home in God – and the self-righteous, the self-satisfied, the self-indulgent who must wander in the desert of disconnection.

Why would Jesus stand on flat ground and preach things that turn our world upside down?

Well, I think he really wants to get our attention!

When things get turned upside down, it gives us a chance to understand what is truly important.

The Beatitudes of Jesus call Christians to think hard about what is really worth doing in life. The Beatitudes are the revelation of some of God's dearest priorities.

Could Jesus be any more forthright in telling us what is truly important? He says, "Woe to you – woe to you if you are spending your life chasing wealth. Woe to you if a full belly and full bank account have highest priority in your life.

"Woe to you if you have worked tirelessly to avoid the pain, the need, the injustice, which afflicts your neighbor. A life focused on consuming, having, is a life NOT worth living!

"But blessed... blessed are you who embrace the poverty of Christ – the poverty which allowed him to pour out everything for those he loved.

Blessed are you, when you know the deep hunger of your own heart – the hunger for God – a hunger which leads you to feed your hungry neighbor.

Blessed are you when people know that you're a Christian, not just through your words, but through your deeds.

Blessed are you because you stood up for the truth, and that standing for truth cost you something.

Blessed are you when you weep – when you weep over the suffering of your friend; when you weep over the violence between nations; when you weep over the violence done to the unborn, the lack of welcome for the stranger or refugee, the injustice which masquerades as 'life in the real world.'

Blessed are you when you weep – because, after all, Jesus wept when his dear friend Lazarus died... and anything that makes us more like Jesus is, by definition, a blessing.

And, in the end, isn't that the whole point? You and I, as baptized believers, are called to live a Christ-like life. The children being baptized this weekend have a right to hear us tell them the truth of Jesus, and they are called by the Spirit to live a Christ-like life.

The Beatitudes are a blessing, because those who seek to live them become more like Christ: the poor, weeping, hungry Christ, the Christ who was persecuted. The Christ whose bold proclamation unleashed the Kingdom here and now.

I wonder – if Jesus stood in front of our state capitol, or in front of Congress, or in front of the White House, what would he say? Would he say "blessed are you" or "woe to you" if he was talking to ... abortion rights activists? Would he say blessed or woe to wall builders, pornography purveyors, environmental polluters, drug dealers? Would he say "blessed" or "woe" to bishops who covered up abuse, priests who carried out abuse, brave voices who cry out for the truth about abuse? Interesting questions to think and pray about. Maybe we'd be surprised by Jesus' answers.

But I AM confident that Jesus is saying: “blessed are you, Jason, you emergency room doctor. You went to Haiti and you wept over the poverty of those people. You went to bed hungry after a long day of hard medicine, and you came back home hungry to help.

Blessed are you Jason, because you let Christ turn your world upside down, and now your priorities are more like the priorities of Christ.

Woe to us if we miss this message. Blessed are we who hear, and believe, and act.

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