NATIONAL CATHOLIC REPORTER
Published on *National Catholic Reporter* (http://ncronline.org)

Blessed are the poor - but what does that mean?

Thomas Gumbleton | Feb. 6, 2014 The Peace Pulpit

Here we have presented for us so clearly the values of Jesus, the way that Jesus expects us to live when we change our lives, are profoundly converted. There's a passage in Matthew's Gospel -- Mark's Gospel also, but I find the one in Mark's Gospel especially appealing -- where there's an incident that brings out so clearly what Jesus means by changing your lives and following him.

Mark tells us [that] just as Jesus was setting out on a journey again, a man ran up to him, knelt before him, and asked, "Good master, what must I do to have eternal life?" Jesus answered, "Why do you call me good? Nobody's good but God alone. But you know the commandments: Do not kill; do not commit adultery; do not steal; do not bear false witness; do not cheat; honor your father and mother," and the man replied, "I have obeyed all these commandments since my childhood."

Then Jesus looked steadily at him, and loved him, and he said, "For you, one thing is lacking. Go, sell what you have, give the money to the poor, then come and follow me." On hearing these words, [the man's] face fell and he went away sorrowful, for he was a man of great wealth.

So clearly illustrated there is what Jesus means when he says, "Change your lives." Probably all of us can remember when we were undergoing our religious instruction as children, we memorized the Ten Commandments, didn't we? Perhaps some of you can still recite those commandments now, but how many of you can recite those beatitudes which were just proclaimed in today's Gospel?

Feast of the Presentation of the Lord
Malachi 3:1-4
Psalms 24:7, 8, 9, 10
Hebrews 2:14-18
Luke 2:22-40
Full text of the readings [1]

The beatitudes -- the blessings that really proclaim the way of Jesus. It goes far beyond merely keeping the commandments, trying to gain eternal life. It's undergoing a profound change in all of our attitudes, our value system, to really come to know Jesus, to hear his message, to imitate his way of life, to follow him. That will require profound conversion.

Today, of course, we can't take apart all the beatitudes and reflect upon all of them individually. Each is so important, though: hunger and thirst for justice; be peacemakers -- those who go out to reconcile, to draw back and give up violence; be sincere of heart. All of these. But today, what is the foundation for all of them and for the whole value system of Jesus? I think it's found in the very first one. As Matthew puts it, "Blessed are the poor in spirit. The reign of God is theirs."

In Luke's Gospel, it just says, "Blessed are the poor," and sometimes people think, "Well, Matthew modified that. Poor in spirit -- that takes a little bit of the edge off of it." But it really doesn't. It simply helps us to realize that when Jesus is talking about "Blessed are the poor," he's talking more about an attitude, a way of knowing one's need for God, which is a disposition of the heart and not simply economic deprivation.

Poor in spirit means that we understand a profound truth about ourselves -- the truth that none of us is responsible for our own existence and our own continuance of existence. Poor in spirit means we understand our need for God and who God is and who we are. Poor in spirit means we understand that without God and God's gift to us of existence, of life, [that] we would not be. God has loved us into being. God has loved all of creation

into being, and it's only God's love that sustains all of creation as it continues to evolve and develop in each one of us God's continuing love.

Sometimes it takes an extraordinary experience to really be startled, almost jolted, into understanding this. I've told this before, but I think of it often: When that earthquake happened in Haiti four years ago now, a friend of mine -- a priest, Fr. Pierre Andre -- was on his way to see the archbishop. He had a meeting with the archbishop that afternoon and he was late, so he called the archbishop and said, "I'll be getting there in about 15 or 20 minutes," and he was making his way through the terrible traffic and finally arrived at the archbishop's offices.

When he got there, he pulled into the parking lot behind the building. On the back of the building, there's a balcony over the second floor, and the archbishop would come out and was standing at the balcony, waiting for Fr. Pierre Andre to get there. He waved when he got there, and Fr. Pierre Andre got out of the car and he was walking toward the steps to go upstairs when someone stopped him.

Someone stopped to say hello, to greet him, and so he paused and chatted for a moment or two, and that's when the earthquake hit. That balcony came tumbling down; the archbishop was killed. Father Pierre was stunned, obviously; shaken. "I'm alive. If I had not stopped for a moment, I would be crushed under that rubble; killed."

Now, not that somehow God made special efforts to protect Father Pierre. No, it isn't that, but it's simply that at any moment, our life can be taken from us. In fact, our very existence could be taken from us, but only God keeps us, has drawn us into being, and sustains us. That's a profound awareness that each of us somehow should nurture within ourselves, because that's the basis for being poor in spirit, for understanding our need of God at every moment.

In a way, I suppose, but not necessarily (I would not say this necessarily), but if you were economically poor, you might have a sense more clearly of your need of God and of all that God can provide. When we have way more wealth than we need, sometimes we begin to think that with that wealth, it gives us power. We can do what we want; we don't need anyone else. We don't need God. How wrong.

So sometimes we have to find the way to make ourselves aware of our need for God in that most profound way. Not just the need for God to provide us with everyday needs, but our need for God to provide our very existence and to sustain us. When we become aware of that, our whole approach to God changes. We begin to be converted to the way of Jesus.

We understand that material goods are not a be-all and end-all for anyone, or should not be. We understand that we need enough to have a full human life, but we don't need excess. We understand that God made the world for all and not just for a few, and so we need to find ways to share the goods of the earth and the goods of our world so everyone has a chance for a full human life.

There's so much that will change in our thinking and in our way of acting once we have that deep sense that we need God and that our very being depends upon God's constant, infinite, unlimited, unconditional love for each one of us. That will change our lives when we begin to have that as the foundation of the value system that Jesus lays out for us in these beatitudes that we hear proclaimed today.

And as we continue to explore this Gospel of Matthew and explore further into what we call the Sermon on the Mount, we'll find all of these values spelled out even more clearly and the challenge becomes real: "Change your lives; begin to follow the way of Jesus." So today, as we reflect on this Gospel and prepare ourselves to continue to reflect on the Sermon on the Mount, as we call it, we can begin that change of our lives by deepening our awareness of our need for God at every moment -- always, everywhere, every moment of our lives.

When we begin to live this new reign, this new value system, well, then we will enter into the reign of God. It's at hand, and as we begin to live according to the ways of Jesus, that reign of God becomes real in our lives, and we begin to experience all those blessings that Jesus lays out for us. We begin to know the fullness of joy and love and peace that comes with the reign of God.

Perhaps our kind of closing thought can be taken from what St. Paul wrote to that church of Corinth, which was our second lesson today: "By God's grace, you are in Christ Jesus, who has become our wisdom from God and who makes us just and holy and free." When we live the way of Jesus, we enter into the reign of God, and God makes us just and holy and free. We pray that each of us today will begin to take seriously the call of Jesus: "Change your lives; enter into the reign of God and receive those gifts. Be holy, just, and free."

[Homily given at a private celebration in Detroit. The transcripts of Bishop Gumbleton's homilies are posted weekly to NCRonline.org. Sign up here [2] to receive an email alert when the latest homily is posted.]

Source URL (retrieved on *11/23/2014 - 14:02*): http://ncronline.org/blogs/peace-pulpit/blessed-are-poor-what-does-mean

Links:
[1] http://www.usccb.org/bible/readings/020214.cfm
[2] http://ncronline.org/email-alert-signup