

Sixth Sunday in Ordinary Time

One day I came across man emptying his rainwater tank. When I asked him why he was doing that he said, “Haven’t you seen the weather forecast. There is a big storm coming.” I was reminded of that as I read today’s gospel. You could say that having an empty rainwater tank in itself is not something that you can be happy about. What is good about having an empty rainwater tank is that it has more room in it to be filled by the anticipated rain that God is going to send.

This seems to be the key to understanding the beatitudes and the woes of today’s gospel. Beatitudes could be described as oxymorons. They hold together two clashing ideas. How can you say that the poor are blessed? How can you congratulate the poor for being poor? How can you congratulate the hungry for being hungry? How can you say that those who are treated badly are happy? You can’t. Or at least you can’t unless you have a particular image of God and an expectation of how God is going to act for those people.

You cannot congratulate someone for having an empty rainwater tank unless you believe that rain is coming. You cannot congratulate the poor unless you believe that God is going to reverse the position that they are in.

Jesus was able to say to those who were beginning to walk with him as his disciples, “How happy are you who are poor; yours is the kingdom of God.” He could say that because they were the ones who were going to be most open to the kingdom of God, to God’s rule. Their poverty made them dependent upon God. Because their lives were not cluttered up by material things then they could more easily turn to the one who was the source of everything that they needed. Their emptiness gave them the capacity to be filled. Jesus was able to congratulate the hungry because they were able to let God feed them. Jesus did not delight in their hunger. He wanted to change their position. He wanted to satisfy their hunger. If they were hungry because they could not find a job, then that was what he wanted to change. The kingdom that he had come to establish was a kingdom of justice where all would be able to make a living, or at least be supported by those who could work.

Jesus had come to turn things upside down. He had come to reverse the injustices under which people suffered. Jesus had come to turn people’s hearts towards God and so towards one another. Jesus had come to bring healing to those whose lives were torn apart by conflict and division.

But Jesus was not a dictator. He didn’t force anybody to accept the rule of God. He left us all free to make the

world beautiful or ugly. He left us all free to heal divisions or keep hurting each other. So much of what he hoped to do is still to be done. The kingdom of God is yet to be established in its fullness on earth.

Many of the reversals that Jesus speaks about in the beatitudes will only be experienced when we are called into eternal life. Jesus admits of that in the last of the beatitudes. “Happy are you when people hate you, drive you out, abuse you, denounce your name as criminal, on account of the Son of Man. Rejoice on that day and dance for joy, for then your reward will be great in heaven.”

The four woes that follow the beatitudes continue with the same message. If we are so rich that we think we have all we need, then we are to be pitied. If we are so full of things of our own choosing, then we will always be hungry. If we do not know when to be serious, then we may not know when to laugh. If we are looking for people to speak well of us, then we haven’t looked far enough.

The imagery used in our first reading from the Prophet Jeremiah reflects what Jesus was talking about. Those who rely upon things of the flesh will be like dry scrub in the wastelands. Those who put their trust in God will

be like a tree by the waterside that never ceases to bear fruit.

The beatitudes are a real challenge for us. But if we look at the context in which they were given we can see that they were spoken not just for our sake but for the sake of others. Look around at the crowd who were there when Jesus taught his disciples. They were the sick and the hungry, the lonely and the lost ones, those who were hurting. Jesus called his disciples to believe in the reversals that God will bring about, not just for us, but for all in our world. Jesus wants us to be so open to God, so empty, so dependent upon God that God can use us all to make real that kingdom that Jesus had come to establish.