

INTRODUCTION

In this book, without theological pretensions or any particular exegesis, I propose a meditation on the Beatitudes found in Matthew's Gospel,¹ especially the first, poorness of spirit: *Blessed are the poor in spirit, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven.* A lot has been written on this topic, but it is so important for the life of the Church that we need always to return to it. Pope Francis ceaselessly exhorts Christians to live the Beatitudes, the only way of true happiness and also the only way to rebuild society.

Today's world is sick with pride, with insatiable desire for riches and domination, and cannot be healed except by accepting this message. To be faithful to the mission Christ entrusted to the Church, to be "*salt of the earth*" and "*light of the world,*"² the Church must be poor, humble, meek, and merciful.

1. Mt 5:1–12.

2. Mt 5:13–14.

We are strongly called to hear this essential teaching of Jesus, which we may not have truly understood or put into practice. As the Church continues its pilgrimage through history, it is increasingly summoned to radiate the spirit of the Beatitudes, giving off “*the aroma of Christ.*”³ The Holy Spirit means to act forcefully to this end, even if doing so sometimes stirs up the Church. Every Christian must give off the perfume of the Gospel, an aroma of peace and meekness, of joy and humility.

More and more I am convinced that poorness of spirit is the key to the spiritual life, indeed to any path toward saintliness and fruitfulness. The Beatitudes contain liberating and enlightening wisdom, yet they are among those parts of the Gospel that we have the most difficulty understanding and putting into practice. Even among Christians one finds a tendency to think too much in terms of riches, quantity, or measurable efficiencies. The Gospel invites us to adopt a very different attitude.

3. 2 Cor 2:15.

A HOLISTIC VIEW OF THIS GOSPEL

Before looking one by one at each of the Beatitudes, I want to say something about them as a whole.

This Gospel passage isn't easy to understand. It is paradoxical, even shocking. When I was a young priest, it was difficult for me to preach on the Beatitudes. But little by little I came to realize that this is an extraordinary text, one that encompasses all the novelty of the Gospel, all its wisdom and its power to transform profoundly the hearts of men and renew the world.

We must, of course, read Jesus' words in their context. The Beatitudes come after verses in Matthew's gospel describing the crowds flocking to listen to Jesus:

And he went about all Galilee, teaching in their synagogues and preaching the gospel of the kingdom and healing every disease and every infirmity among the people. So his fame spread throughout all Syria, and they brought him all the sick, those afflicted with various diseases and pains, demoniacs, epileptics, and paralytics, and he healed them. And great crowds followed him from Galilee and the Decapólis and Jerusalem and Judea and from beyond the Jordan.⁴

4. Mt 4:23–25.

Seeing the crowds, Jesus climbs the mountain, sits down, lets his disciples approach him, and begins to teach by proclaiming the Beatitudes.

The crowds that gather around Jesus are thirsty for healing, for light, for happiness. He responds to this thirst; he gives these suffering people a magnificent promise of happiness, repeated nine times but in language very different from what we might expect. What he proposes isn't a human happiness, the image of happiness we are accustomed to, but an unexpected happiness, encountered in situations and attitudes not normally associated with happiness—a happiness that is not a human production but a “surprise from God,” granted precisely when and where we thought it impossible.

Notice that through the image of salt and light, Jesus' first words after the Beatitudes evoke the singular grace that rests on his disciples and to which they must be faithful:

You are the salt of the earth; but if salt has lost its taste, how shall its saltiness be restored? It is no longer good for anything except to be thrown out and trodden under foot by men. You are the light of the world. A city set on a hill cannot be hid. Nor do men

light a lamp and put it under a bushel, but on a stand, and it gives light to all in the house. Let your light so shine before men, that they may see your good works and give glory to your Father who is in heaven.⁵

Jesus is quite aware of his disciples' human limits and failings, which the Gospel stories do just the reverse of attempting to conceal. But he doesn't hesitate to affirm that, without the witness of their lives, human existence would not have any appeal or make sense, and the world would fall into deep darkness. Evidently it is precisely in living the Beatitudes that they can fulfill this vocation of service to the world. Only the Gospel of the Beatitudes gives human existence its full meaning and truth.

In Matthew's gospel the Beatitudes form the introduction to the Sermon on the Mount, which is covered in chapters 5 to 7. This, Jesus' first major discourse, presents him as the new Moses who proclaims the new covenant of the Kingdom. Not, however, from the heights of Mount Sinai, smoking and quaking, in *thunders and lightnings, and a thick cloud*⁶ but, as tradition

5. Mt 5:13–16.

6. Ex 19:16.

says, on a little hill on the banks of the Sea of Galilee. Yet this doesn't prevent Jesus from speaking with force and authority, an authority that surprised the crowd in that it was so different from the way the rabbis of the day taught. Several times he says, "*You have heard that it was said . . . , but I say to you . . .*" Yet he insists that he has not come to "*abolish the law and the prophets . . . but to fulfil them.*"⁷

The Sermon on the Mount concludes with the parable of two houses, one built on rock and the other on sand. This is a vibrant exhortation not to be content with saying "Lord, Lord" to this New Covenant but to put it into practice, thus doing the will of the Father who is in heaven.⁸

This New Covenant Jesus promulgates on the mount of the Beatitudes is not just a moral law, even though it obviously has strong implications for the domain of human behavior. Even more deeply than a code of conduct, no matter how exalted, it is a path toward the happiness of the Kingdom, an itinerary for union with God and personal interior renewal. It proposes a way of identification with Christ, of discovery

7. Mt 5:17.

8. Mt 7:21, 24–27.

of the Father, of openness to the Holy Spirit. Only the Spirit can give us true understanding of the Beatitudes, and only the Spirit makes it possible for us to apply them in our lives.

THE TRINITY IN THE BEATITUDES

The Trinitarian mystery present in the Gospel of the Beatitudes deserves our particular attention. More than a guide for conduct, it is first of all a profound, unexpected, and surprising new revelation of the very mystery of God.

A first reading makes it clear that the eight Beatitudes in St. Matthew (eight if we consider the ninth a repetition and amplification of the eighth) are above all a portrait of Jesus himself. “*The Beatitudes are not only a map for Christian life, but are the secret to Jesus’ heart itself.*”⁹ One could spend a long time explaining and meditating on how Christ, in his entire life and particularly in his Passion, is really the one who is poor in spirit—the only one who has integrally lived each of the Beatitudes, which are fully realized on the Cross.

9. Jean-Claude Sagne, *La quête de Dieu, chemin de guérison* (Paris: Éditions de l’Emmanuel, 2005), p. 89.