

HOMILY OF HIS EXCELLENCY ARCHBISHOP CHRISTOPHE PIERRE
APOSTOLIC NUNCIO TO THE UNITED STATES
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My Friends,

Following the pattern of the Disciples on the Road to Emmaus, we have just listened to the Scriptures, words which warm our hearts and draw us nearer to the Lord whom we will know intimately in the Breaking of the Bread. Luke's version of the Beatitudes, which we just heard, differs from Matthew's in that it includes both blessings and woes. The Sermon on the Plain is addressed to all Jesus' disciples, including us. Jesus says, "Blessed are *you*" and "Woe to *you*."

The use of blessing and woe is consistent with the theme of a "reversal of fortune" that we see throughout Luke's Gospel, beginning with the *Magnificat* when Mary says that God *has cast down the mighty from their thrones and has lifted up the lowly*. Luke's Gospel contains a theme of God's preferential option for the poor and the promise of salvation to the marginalized – to the poor, the leper, and the foreigner. The theme of reversal of fortune and the use of Blessings and Woes allude to two different ways of living: the fulfilling way of discipleship or the way of the world that leads to destruction.

When Jesus says, "Blessed are you", He is not so much referring to happiness or *eudaimonia* as much as He is saying *makarios* or congratulations. He says: "Congratulations that you are poor, hungry, weeping, and persecuted! Congratulations for living a life that is righteous and pleasing to God!"

Among the poor, hungry and sorrowful, we find people who are not dependent on worldly things for satisfaction but who are consoled knowing that worldly goods and success do not guarantee membership in the Kingdom. The congratulations offered by Jesus in the blessing is that the disciples have something akin to that which Saint Paul had when he wrote: *I count everything as loss because of the surpassing worth of knowing Christ Jesus my Lord. For his sake I have suffered the loss of all things and count them as rubbish that I may gain Christ*. The experience of poverty, hunger, sorrow, and persecution are proof that one is sharing in the life of Christ and His Kingdom. Is there any greater blessing?

But what is meant by *woe*? It is not a material curse; rather, the *woes* are best understood as disfavor in God's sight. The *woes* are a call to repentance. By placing their trust in material things, people endanger their salvation, not only by not relying on God but also by neglecting the needs of their neighbor, including the poor, the hungry, and the stranger. Jesus warns the powerful and mighty that unless they repent, they are heading for destruction. The four sets of blessings and woes – poor versus rich; hungry versus full; weeping versus laughing; being hated versus being well-respected – highlight the call for the disciples to live differently. Do we live differently because we know Jesus?

Poor versus Rich: In Luke's Gospel, there is a constant theme, not of class warfare, but of a preferential option for the poor and marginalized. It is not that God is always displeased with the rich; rather, it is a matter of security. True security is in the Lord, not in material wealth. Jesus tells the poor that even now "yours is the Kingdom of heaven", while he warns that the rich have

already *received* their consolation. The poor share in the fruits of the Kingdom even though they live at the peripheries; in contrast, the rich, having already received full payment, should not expect anything further. The poor look forward in hope to the promises of God.

Hungry versus Full: Here the Lord contrasts those who do not have enough to meet their daily needs with those who have more than what they need. God promises that those who struggle to survive will have their fill, while those who selfishly hoard earthly riches will find themselves empty. The story of Lazarus, who used to beg for scraps for the rich man's table but who later found himself in the bosom of Abraham, illustrates what awaits those who hunger not only for material bread but also for God, in contrast, with the rich man who was "full" of what this world offered but who found himself in torment for failing to act on behalf of his hungry brother Lazarus. To those who hunger now, Jesus promises not only that they will have enough to satiate their hunger, but in the Kingdom, they will be abundantly filled.

Weeping versus Laughing: Jesus does not tell his disciples that they shouldn't rejoice; rather, those who weep now are those who have suffered true pain in their lives, the result of progressive marginalization and exclusion. Jesus promises them joy: the joy in knowing God and in being called to discipleship. In the Kingdom, they will experience welcome and acceptance rather than rejection and stigmatization. In contrast, there is a woe to those who laugh; they are the ones who are receiving a transient, worldly joy, which often comes at the expense of others. But what of eternal joy? By neglecting their responsibilities toward the suffering through indifference, they set themselves up for eternal desolation. [I invite you to reflect on how this might apply to how we treat migrants.]

Hatred versus Bring Well-Respected: Here the blessing of being hated is qualified by suffering for the sake of Jesus – that is, for giving witness to Him. The prophets suffered persecution for their fidelity to the Lord, but the blessing was found in the joy of doing God's will. If we are doing God's will, then we should expect persecution from the powers of this world and resistance to the Gospel. Like the Apostles, we should *rejoice for having been found worthy to suffer for the sake of the Name*.

In contrast to the truly prophetic voice, there are those who simply want to be accepted by the wealthy, the politicians, and those with influence in politics or culture. They never want to "rock the boat" but prefer to keep quiet and to be well-liked. This is like Herod when confronted by John the Baptist. He liked John and was convicted by his preaching, but because of the oaths he had sworn and because of the guests – human respect – he had John beheaded. Jesus warns his disciples of the need to please God rather than men. The difference is the difference between life and death.

Today's Gospel is an invitation to examine our own attitudes. What is that we really seek? Are we seeking the face of the Lord, seeking to adhere to and follow Him or are we seeking the admiration of the world with little care for the poorest of the poor? There is a stark choice to be made. In the Sermon on the Plain we hear an echo of what was said by the Lord in the Book of Deuteronomy: *I have set before you life and death, blessings and curses. Now choose life, so that you and your children may live.*