

ALL SAINTS– 1st November 2020

BLESSED ARE THE POOR IN SPIRIT
Biblical Commentary by Father Alberto Maggi OSM

Matthew 5,1-12

Seeing the crowds, he went up on the mountain, and when he sat down, his disciples came to him. And he opened his mouth and taught them, saying:

“Blessed are the poor in spirit, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven.

“Blessed are those who mourn, for they shall be comforted.

“Blessed are the meek, for they shall inherit the earth.

“Blessed are those who hunger and thirst for righteousness, for they shall be satisfied.

“Blessed are the merciful, for they shall receive mercy.

“Blessed are the pure in heart, for they shall see God.” “Blessed are the peacemakers, for they shall be called sons of God.

“Blessed are those who are persecuted for righteousness' sake, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven. “Blessed are you when others revile you and persecute you and utter all kinds of evil against you falsely on my account. Rejoice and be glad, for your reward is great in heaven, for so they persecuted the prophets who were before you.

The beatitudes are undoubtedly the masterpiece of Matthew's gospel, not a masterpiece only from the theological point of view, but also we will see its spirituality and the literary richness. So let's see this extraordinary text in Matthew's gospel chapter 5. The evangelist writes: *“Seeing the crowds, he went up on the mountain,..”* seeing the crowds, Jesus does not distance himself, he does not turn away, but he wants to take them where? On “the” mountain. This mount is preceded by the article determinative, the mountain, is not any mountain, but it does not say which mountain. What is the meaning of this? The mountain, in the Jewish biblical tradition, indicated Mount Sinai, where God, through Moses, gave and stipulated the covenant with his people, but also the divine condition. So Jesus, through the proclamation of these beatitudes, wants to bring the crowds, every person, so it is an invitation valid forever, to reach the divine condition.

“..and when he sat down,..” in the attitude of the teacher, *“.. his disciples came to him. And he opened his mouth and taught them, saying: ...”* and here the evangelist presents the Beatitudes. It's a meticulous work that Matthew did, he calculated not only the number of beatitudes, but even with how many words to compose these beatitudes according to the literary techniques of the time.. The beatitudes are exactly 8, number 8, in the spiritual tradition, in primitive Christianity indicated the resurrection of Jesus, who rose again the first day after the week. Because of this the baptisteries, the place where baptism was received, always had the octagonal shape. Then the number 8 indicates life that is not interrupted by death. The evangelist wants to indicate that, with the acceptance of these beatitudes, one has within oneself a life, which will then be able to overcome death. But not only that: the evangelist also calculates the number of words with which to compose the beatitudes, and they are exactly 72, and the evangelist just wanted to create this number because, in the middle, we see that there is a repetition of something that was not necessary for the text. Why 72? Because, according to the calculation contained in the book of Genesis in the

tenth chapter, in the Greek version, the gentile peoples, known at that time, were 72. What is the intent of the evangelist? While, on Sinai, Moses proclaimed the commandments, which were reserved for people of Israel, on this mountain, which replaces Sinai, Jesus does not receive the new covenant from God, but He, who is God, proclaims the new covenant, which is valid for all humanity.

The first of the Beatitudes is the most important of all, because it is the key to the existence of all the others, and Jesus begins by proclaiming: "*Blessed*". What is the meaning of this expression? It is so great a happiness that it was thought unattainable on this earth. At that time, in that culture, the blessed were the gods, who enjoyed privileges not granted to humans. **But, to understand the Beatitudes, this acclamation of Jesus "blessed" must always be placed after the situations, or the indications that he puts forward.**

The first *blessed* are "*the poor in spirit*". It must immediately be said that Jesus never proclaims the blessed poor. The poor are wretched, and it is the duty of the Christian community to remove from their unhappy situation. Jesus does not ask his disciples to identify with the many, too many poor that society produces, but to commit themselves to eliminate the causes of their poverty. Jesus proclaims: "*Blessed are the poor in spirit,...*" or of spirit. The Greek particle can be translated in three ways, let's see what the meaning can be. Poor "of" spirit, that is, those who are lacking in spirit, idiots, but it is not possible for Jesus to proclaim stupidity as the greatest aspiration of man, so we discard it. It can be poor "*in*" spirit, that is, a person who, despite possessing goods, is spiritually detached from them and, coincidentally, this was precisely the explanation put forward by the church. But Jesus does not ask for spiritual poverty, but asks for immediate poverty. When he meets or clashes with the rich, he will not ask them to detach themselves spiritually from their riches, but asks for an immediate and real detachment. Then the third possibility is poor "for" the spirit, that is, not those that society has made poor, but those who freely, voluntarily, for the spirit, for this inner strength they have within, choose to enter this condition. Which does not mean, as we have said, adding to the many, too many poor people that society continually churns out, but it means decreasing their standard of living, to allow those who have a lower standard can rise to a better one. These are the poor in spirit, they are those who accept to generously share what they are and what they have.

The poor in spirit, those who make this choice, Jesus proclaims them "*.. for theirs is ..*" the verb is the present, not the future, but the immediate possibility, the present "*.. for theirs is the kingdom of heaven.*" Unfortunately, in the past, this kingdom of heaven created so much confusion, it was understood as a kingdom in heaven, as if it were the afterlife, and in fact it was said precisely to the poor that they were blessed because they would go to heaven. It is none of this. Matthew is the only evangelist that uses this expression "*.. the kingdom of heaven.*" Where as all the others use "*the kingdom of God*" Jesus had already proclaimed the necessity of conversion, because the kingdom of God was near. With the acceptance of the beatitudes, the kingdom of God becomes a reality. But what does this "*kingdom of heaven*" mean? That God governs his own. And how does God govern his people? Not by issuing laws external to man that he must observe, but by communicating to them his own capacity to love. Then Jesus says: those who freely, voluntarily choose this, blessed because, from this precise moment in which they make this choice, they welcome this beatitude, they allow God to manifest himself as Father in their existence. Then all the other beatitudes follow

in series of three. The first three beatitudes concern the sufferings of humanity, in a community - they are not for an individual, they are for a community - where the Christian community is called to free from these sufferings, and then the effects, the flowering of love within individuals and the community by welcoming these beatitudes.