

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

Matthew 5,1-12

Now when Jesus saw the crowds, he went up on a mountainside and sat down. His disciples came to him, and he began to teach them.

He said:

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

Blessed are those who mourn, for they will be comforted.

Blessed are the meek, for they will inherit the earth.

Blessed are those who hunger and thirst for righteousness, for they will be filled.

Blessed are the merciful, for they will be shown mercy.

Blessed are the pure in heart, for they will see God.

Blessed are the peacemakers, for they will be called children of God.

Blessed are those who are persecuted because of righteousness, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven. “Blessed are you when people insult you, persecute you and falsely say all kinds of evil against you because of me. Rejoice and be glad, because great is your reward in heaven, for in the same way they persecuted the prophets who were before you.”

The Beatitudes are undoubtedly the masterpiece of Matthew 's Gospel , a masterpiece not only from the point of view theological , we see his spiritual richness, but also literary. Let's see then in chapter 5, of Matthew's gospel, this extraordinary text.

The evangelist writes: “*Now when Jesus saw the crowds, he went up on a mountainside..*” seeing the crowds Jesus did not go away but where does he go? Up a mountainside, but it does not say which mountain. What is the meaning of this? The mountain in the Hebrew biblical tradition indicated Mount Sinai , where God, through Moses, gave him, the covenant with his people, but also the divine condition. So, Jesus through the proclamation of these beatitudes, wants to bring every person in the crowd, to achieve the divine condition, therefore it is an invitation valid for always.

“*..and sat down.*” in the attitude of the teacher, “*His disciples came to him, and he began to teach them.*” and here the evangelist presents the beatitudes. It is a painstaking work that Matthew undertook : he calculated not only the number of the beatitudes, but even how many words make up these beatitudes, according to the literary techniques of the time. They are exactly 8, because the number 8, in the spiritual tradition, in the primitive Christianity meant Jesus' resurrection, that he rose the first day after the week. For this the baptismal fonts, the place where you received baptism, always have an octagonal shape. Then number 8 also indicates the life that is not interrupted by death. The evangelist wants to indicate that, with the acceptance of these beatitudes, if there is a life within, then death will be able to be overcome . But the evangelist also calculates the number of words which compose the beatitudes, and there are exactly 72. The evangelist wanted to create this exact number because, at a certain moment, you can see that there is a repetition of something that was not necessary for text. Why 72? Because, according to the calculations contained in the book of Genesis, at chapter 10, in the Greek version, the gentile populations, known at that time, were 72. What is the evangelist's intention? While, on Sinai, Moses proclaimed the commandments, which were reserved to the people of 'Israel. On this mountain, which replaces the Sinai, Jesus did not

receive the new covenant from God, but He who is God, proclaims the new covenant, which it is valid for all mankind.

The first beatitude is the most important of all, because it is the key, for the existence of all the others. And Jesus begins by saying: "*Blessed* " What is the meaning of this expression? It's such a great happiness, that it was thought unattainable on this earth. At that time, in that culture, the blessed were the gods, that enjoyed privileges not granted to humans. But to understand the beatitudes, Jesus' exclamation "*Blessed*". must always be put after the situation, or the indication that he gives.

The first blessed are "*the poor in spirit,*" It should immediately be said that Jesus never proclaimed blessed are the poor. The poor are the unfortunate, the task of the Christian community is to take away their situation of misery. Jesus does not ask his disciples to go and add to the many poor that the society produces, but to work towards the eliminating of the causes of their poverty.

Jesus says: "*Blessed are the poor in spirit,* " or of spirit. The Greek word can be translated in three ways, let's see what can be the meaning. Poor " of " spirit, those that are lacking in spirit, but it cannot be claimed as man's highest aspiration is stupidity, therefore this is discarded. It can be poor "in" spirit, that is a person who, while possessing the assets, is spiritually indifferent. This was precisely the explanation carried out by the church. But Jesus does not ask for a spiritual poverty, but asks for an immediate poverty. When one meets or come up against the rich, you do not ask them to break away from the spiritually by his wealth, but asks them for an immediate and real detachment.

The third possibility is "for" the spirit, that is not those that the society has made poor, but those that freely, voluntarily, for the spirit, for this internal strength that they have inside, choose the enter into this condition, that does not mean as we have said, to go a join the many poor that the society continues to create, but it means to lower their living standard, to allow those worse off to be a little better. These are the poor in spirit, they are those that accept generously to divide what they have with others.

The poor in spirit, those that choose this, Jesus proclaimed blessed "*.. for theirs is ..*" the verb is in the present, it is not a promise for the future, but a immediate possibility, now. "*..for theirs is the kingdom of heaven.*" Unfortunately, in the past, this kingdom of heaven has created great confusion, it was understood as the kingdom in heaven, as if it was the afterlife, and in fact it was said to the poor that they were blessed, because they would go to paradise. Nothing like this. Matthew is the only evangelist that uses this expression " the kingdom of heaven", where all the others use "kingdom of God". Jesus had already proclaimed the invitation necessary to conversion, because he was near to the kingdom of God. With the acceptance of the beatitudes, the kingdom of God becomes a reality. But was does this "kingdom of heaven " mean? That God governs his own. And how does God govern his own? Not by issuing laws, external to mankind, that must be observed, but by communicating to them him own capacity to love.

So, Jesus says : those who freely and voluntary choose this, are blessed because, from this precise moment, in which they choose, accept these beatitudes, they allow God to manifest themselves as Father in their existence. Then they follow all the other beatitudes in a series of three, the first three are related to human suffering, that a community – the beatitudes are not for an individual, they are for the community –that the Christian community is called to break free from these sufferings, and then the effects, the blossoming of love within the individual and the community with the acceptance of these beatitudes.