



Blessed are you

MEDITATIONS ON THE
BEATITUDES & DAILY LIFE

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MEDITATIONS ON THE BEATITUDES AND DAILY LIFE

According to the Merriam Webster™ Dictionary, the word *blessed* means 'endowed with divine favour and protection.' Synonyms for the term include: fortunate, lucky, privileged, select, happy, joyful, joyous, glad and enviable. An antonym: wretched.

This understanding highlights the core message of the Sermon on the Mount with the delivery of the Beatitudes. Jesus wanted those present in that moment and all who have ears to hear since, that the life of faith is indeed richly blessed. It is the pathway to human happiness in this world and for all eternity. Pope Francis said, "The Beatitudes are the path that God indicates as the answer to man's innate desire for happiness, and they perfect the Commandments of the Old Covenant."

Whether we are persecuted, reviled or in mourning, our faith calls us to be humble, merciful, compassionate, gentle, strong, righteous and peace-making agents of love in our world. It is indeed a joy and a privilege to be a person of faith, 'endowed with divine favour and protection'.

And what are we to do with this blessing? Pope Francis reminds us that the Beatitudes are the "protocol" by which we will be judged at the end of our days:

"What is the protocol by which the judge will evaluate us? We find it in Chapter 25 of the Gospel of Matthew. The Lord will recognize us if, in our turn, we recognized him in the poor, in the hungry, in the indigent and the outcast, in those who suffer and

are alone ... This is one of the fundamental criteria for evaluating our Christian life, which Jesus calls us to measure up to every day. I read the Beatitudes and I think of how my Christian life should be, and then I examine my conscience with this Chapter 25 of Matthew. Every day: I did this, I did this, I did this.... It will do us good! They are simple but concrete things."

This resource, *Blessed Are You: Meditations on the Beatitudes and Daily Life* provides an opportunity to reflect on the Beatitudes in the context of our contemporary world. The articles within were written by Br Mark O'Connor FMS and previously published as part of his regular column 'Spirit is Moving' in Kairos Catholic Journal (Vol. 26, Nos. 2-26).

Each article is followed by a number of questions for personal enrichment in a variety of parish and school settings. They are suitable for use individually or collectively, with small or large groups, within one or over several sessions or as an opening prayer reflection. They may also be used as a 'take home sheet' or bulletin/website activity at any time. They do not have to be explored in a set order.

Savour and absorb the richness of the content within. May the 'Be-attitudes' continue to inform and invigour our efforts. May we each be a blessing in the lives of those we meet and for the world in which we move. ■

Blessed are the poor in spirit

FOR THEIRS IS THE KINGDOM OF HEAVEN

Why is it that we sense some people are not really present to us and are simply just unable to listen?

The great German theologian, JB Metz, gives a good answer to this question, in his spiritual classic, *Poverty of Spirit*. Metz believed the lack of ‘poverty of spirit’ in our relationships with others damages our capacity to communicate the Good News. He wrote:

Every genuine human encounter must be inspired by poverty of the spirit. We must forget ourselves in order to let the other person approach us. We must be able to open up to the other person, to let that person’s distinctive personality unfold—even though it often frightens or repels us. We often keep the other person down, and only see what we want to see; thus we never really encounter the mysterious secret of their being, only ourselves. Failing to risk the poverty of encounter, we indulge in a new form of self-assertion and pay a price for it: loneliness. Because we did not risk the poverty of openness (cf. Matthew 10:39), our lives are not graced with the warm fullness of human existence. We are left with only a shadow of our real self.

We, disciples of Jesus, are all called, in the first of the Beatitudes, to arrive at an inner poverty of spirit, an inner nothingness and openness to Christ.

Whether we arrive there as a result of our sins (more usually), or as a result of our virtues, matters not at all,



The Deposition by Safet Zec (2014). Current location: Church of the Gesù, Rome, Italy.

provided we become poor with the poor Christ. Struggling through this ‘becoming’ process, with our eyes fixed on the poor Christ, is a large part of our inner journey as disciples.

Martin Laird OSA, in his book *Into the Silent Land*, describes it poetically as ‘the liturgy of our wounds’. Unquestionably, it is a long and demanding task for most of us. It certainly is for me. For there is a deeply ingrained tendency to recoil from my own brokenness, to judge it as others have judged it, to loathe it as I have been ‘taught’ over a lifetime to loathe it. In doing this I avoid what God, in Christ, draws close to and embraces.

God meets us then at that precise point where we are most in need, in our poverty and brokenness.

One remarkable contemporary witness to this Beatitude of ‘poverty of spirit’ was Fr Pedro Arrupe SJ, former general of the Jesuits. On a recent occasion, I had the privilege of praying at his tomb in the famous Church of the Gesù—the Mother Church of the Society of Jesus in Rome—where St Ignatius, a fellow Basque, lived and prayed.

A marvellous new painting blessed by Pope Francis now adorns a side chapel there. It commemorates the 200th anniversary of the restoration of the Society of Jesus. It powerfully witnesses to Fr Arrupe’s humble service at ‘the

Blessed are those who mourn

FOR THEY WILL BE COMFORTED

Certain realities in life we see only through eyes that are cleansed with our tears. —Pope Francis

One of the most powerful moments of Pope Francis' visit to Asia in 2015 was when a weeping 12-year-old Filipino girl asked him how God could allow children to become prostitutes.

Francis discarded most of his prepared speech that he was due to give in English, reverting to his native Spanish to deliver an impromptu and heartfelt response.

'She is the only one who has put a question for which there is no answer and she wasn't even able to express it in words but in tears,' he told the crowd. 'The nucleus of your question ... almost doesn't have a reply ... [There are] certain realities in life we see only through eyes that are cleansed with our tears.' He urged the people gathered 'to think, to feel and to do', asking them to repeat these words in a chorus.

Like Jesus, Pope Francis was reminding us that, paradoxically, our tears, our laments, our mourning and our grief are to be embraced rather than shunned.

Jesus' saying, 'Blessed are those who mourn, for they will be comforted', often seems nonsensical to us when we are in pain. How can we be *blessed* when our hearts are breaking, when sorrow and loss overwhelm us?

Yet this beatitude is a deep source of our hope as we cry out to the Lord. It tells us that this 'grief work' is the precondition of joy. It announces that those who have not cared enough to grieve will not know joy.

The great biblical scholar, Walter Brueggemann, reminds us that the Psalms (especially the lament Psalms) that many of us pray daily are a great resource as we live this mystery. He writes: 'The laments are refusals to settle for the way things are. They are acts of relentless hope that



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believes no situation falls outside of Yahweh's capacity for transformation.'

Yes, we need laments. We need to grieve and mourn and 'see through eyes that are cleansed with our tears'.

Perhaps some people were surprised that Pope Francis did not have an 'answer' for that 12-year-old Filipino girl. But the gift of Pope Francis is his pastor's heart—he is so honest and authentic. For the truth is that Christians rarely have 'solutions' to the problems of the suffering in this world.

But with Francis we have something greater: a conviction, born of the Risen Jesus, that love, solidarity and grief are the birth pangs of God's kingdom, which is coming if we can but 'mourn'.

Or, as Mary Oliver puts it so beautifully in one of her poems on grief and mourning:

To live in this world you must be able to do three things: to love what is mortal; to hold it against your bones knowing your own life depends on it; and, when the time comes to let it go, to let it go.

For 'those who sow in tears will reap with songs of joy' (Psalm 126:5). ■

think about it

1. Pope Francis said, “There are certain realities in life we see only through eyes that are cleansed with tears.”
 - *Does this statement resonate with your own life experience? If so, how?*
 - *What insight does it offer about the human reality of grief and loss in our world?*
2. Jesus’ mission to promote and share the Good News is expressed so tangibly in this beatitude – that in the fullness of time, all mourning will be redeemed.
 - *As a person of faith, does this beatitude give you comfort and hope? If so, how? If not, why?*
3. Pope Francis urged the People of God gathered ‘to think, to feel and to do’.
 - *Repeat these words several times now – either alone or as a group.*

Blessed are the meek

FOR THEY WILL INHERIT THE EARTH

*Nothing is so strong as gentleness,
nothing so gentle as real strength.*

—St Francis de Sales

The Beatitudes give us the ultimate portrait of what it means to be a saint. But our contemporaries, who especially value self-assertion, individualism and ‘getting on’, have a very hard time accepting that being *meek* is any sort of ideal or blessing!

Meekness is anathema in our aggressive culture of strivers where winning is all important. Life for many is a Darwinian jungle where ‘survival of the fittest’ is the only golden rule.

Even in the Church, these last decades we have seen too many polarising ‘culture warriors’ who seem desperately searching for enemies within to fight and condemn. It is fascinating how extremists of all ideological types despise meekness and gentleness. They see it as a sign of weakness.

Thank God Pope Francis is *meekly* suggesting a wiser pastoral strategy! In calling the Church to a style of evangelisation that ‘attracts’ rather than endlessly ‘scolds’, Pope Francis is affirming with St Francis de Sales that ‘nothing is so strong as gentleness, nothing so gentle as real strength’. Even better, it actually works pastorally!

For after all, meekness and gentleness are not character flaws. They are the ‘power of the powerless One’—which is available to any one of us who risks solidarity with the Crucified and Risen Jesus.

Christ Jesus came not to the proud or the assertive ‘winners’. He came to the poor and the humble. He came meekly. Dorothy Day once wrote: ‘As for ourselves, yes, we must be meek, bear injustice, malice, rash judgement. We must turn the other cheek, give up our cloak, go a second mile.’



Picture by Josh Parris / Wikimedia Commons / Public Domain

Of course, one cannot read books and earn degrees so as to become meek and humble. It cannot be *achieved* at all! Meekness and humility can only be ‘learnt’ by removing oneself from the endless competitiveness of our culture and simply being present to the suffering ones all around us. It is ‘caught’, not ‘taught’.

Think of our own Melbourne ‘saint’, Sir Edward ‘Weary’ Dunlop. ‘Weary’ demonstrated exceptional personal qualities of humility. He spent his life in service to others. Renowned as the ‘Christ of the Burma Railway’, he served for four years as medical officer, leader, motivator and death-defying advocate for fellow diggers during World War II. On ‘Weary’s’ return to Melbourne he became a powerful force for good in our community.

God dwelled within this Melbourne man. God’s meek ‘power’ in the world radiated from his humble persona. In his own way he was literally an icon of Christ.

I suppose one could give an erudite theological definition of the beatitude of ‘meekness’. But ultimately this mystery is revealed not in grand theories but in the faces of real living persons like ‘Weary’ Dunlop. That is where God’s glory truly shines. ■

Dotted lines for writing.

think about it

1. Pope Francis is ‘meekly’ calling the Church to a style of evangelisation that ‘attracts’ rather than endlessly ‘scolds’.
 - *Reflect on those times you have felt positively engaged in your local parish community. As a disciple of Jesus, is your personal witness ‘attractive’ to others within and beyond the parish? If so, how? If not, why?*
2. ‘As for ourselves, we must be meek, bear injustice, malice ... and turn the other cheek.’ The inherent challenge in meekness is avoiding passivity and choosing instead to ‘act in love’ with integrity and peaceful intent.
 - *Recall a time in your life when you have met this challenge. What empowered you to do so?*
3. Meekness and humility is caught, not taught!
 - *Who have been the real ‘living and faith-filled models of gentleness and strength in your life? Pray with gratitude for their witness.*

Dotted lines for writing.

Blessed

are those who hunger and thirst for righteousness

FOR THEY WILL BE FILLED

'Let us enter into our restless flawed hearts and seek the one who alone quenches our "hunger and thirst".'

Jesus claims in the Sermon on the Mount that those who hunger and thirst for righteousness will be filled. This is certainly no excuse for quietism and inaction on our part! There is nothing 'blessed' about dying of lack of food and water! Too many people, especially children, are literally dying of hunger and thirst this very day. To somehow 'spiritualise' their agony would be a shocking mockery of the Beatitudes.

As Christians we have a grave responsibility to ensure the physical hunger of all people is met. Caritas' *Project Compassion* and the great resource of our tradition of Catholic social teaching need to be acted upon to ensure that the injustice of starvation is eliminated in our lifetimes. It is possible!

That acknowledged, in this Beatitude Jesus is also speaking on another level—about human drives, desires, passions and appetites. Other types of hunger and thirst need to be dealt with as they are also crucial issues for our full liberation in Christ.

Gerald May in his marvellous book, *Addiction and Grace*, reflected:

After 20 years of listening to the yearnings of people's hearts, I am convinced that all human beings have an inborn desire for God ... Some of us have repressed this desire, burying it beneath so many other interests that we are completely unaware of it. Or we may experience it in different ways—as longing for wholeness, completion, or fulfilment. Regardless of how we describe it, it is a longing for love.



Dorothy Day

Yes, in addition to our physical need for food and drink, there is a 'God-shaped hole' of empty desire within each of us. It resides in the deep centre of ourselves that we call the 'heart'. We are born with it, it is never completely satisfied, and it never dies. We are often unaware of it, but the desire is always awake.

We are indeed blessed if we can also recognise this 'thirst' and 'hunger' within us all. It is not a sign that something is 'wrong' but the dynamic presence of the Spirit of Jesus within us!

Yet, we all know how deeply we human beings resist the Spirit. Sometimes our inner ache, our loneliness, our 'desire'—our thirsts and hungers—become too much for us and we try to bury them with excessive work. We can try to run from them for years, even decades, but they keep reappearing in unguarded moments.

Usually our defence is to try to numb these desires with 'idols' and false attachments in our souls. These days we tend to call them 'addictions'.

At the funeral recently of a famous *New York Times* journalist who struggled with such addictions, Jesuit Fr James Martin put it this way:

All of us are imperfect, flawed, even sinful. And more to the point, all of us have been addicted in our own ways to different things. If it's not alcohol, it may be status. If it's not drugs, it may be power. If it's not crack, it may be money. But we are also, all of us, beloved children of God, loved by God in spite of our failings—maybe loved even more for them, much as

a parent loves a child more intensely when he or she is in trouble.

As Dorothy Day's life taught us, action to eliminate the unjust hunger of the world's poor must be a constant concern as we celebrate the Eucharist. At the same time, let us enter into our restless flawed hearts and seek the One who alone can quench our 'hunger and thirst'.

Mary Oliver's poem captures that inner challenge for all of us on the road to conversion from addictions to real life in Jesus. ■

THIRST

*Another morning and I wake with thirst
for the goodness I do not have. I walk
out to the pond and all the way God has
given us such beautiful lessons. Oh Lord,
I was never a quick scholar but sulked
and hunched over my books past the hour
and the bell; grant me, in your mercy,
a little more time. Love for the earth
and love for you are having such a long
conversation in my heart. Who knows what
will finally happen or where I will be sent,
yet already I have given a great many things
away, expecting to be told to pack nothing,
except the prayers which, with this thirst,
I am slowly learning.*

—Mary Oliver, *Thirst*, Beacon Press, Boston, 2006

think about it

1. 'As Christians, we have a grave responsibility to ensure the physical hunger of all people is met.'
 - *What personal action are you currently involved in, to eliminate the unjust hunger of the world's poor? If none, how might you participate from now on?*
2. 'The human need to fill the 'God-shaped hole' is in each of our hearts. As St Augustine of Hippo wrote, 'You have made us for yourself O lord and our hearts are restless until they rest in you.'
 - *Can you name the deepest longings of your heart right now? If so, reverently take them to a dialogue with our loving God. If not, be still and ask God to reveal them.*
3. 'All of us are imperfect, flawed, even sinful ... but, we are also beloved children of God, loved by God in spite of our failings, much as a parent loves a child more intensely when he or she is in trouble.'
 - *With a self-reflection of humility and mercy, acknowledge and name your recurring weakness and prayerfully ask for forgiveness and healing. Now, spend some quiet time in prayer using the mantra, 'I am known and deeply loved by God.'*

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Blessed are the merciful

FOR THEY WILL RECEIVE MERCY

Feeling mercy ... changes everything ... This is the best thing we can feel: it changes the world. A little mercy makes the world less cold and more just. —Pope Francis, Angelus, March 2013)

Some people are suspicious of all this contemporary talk about the beatitude of ‘mercy’—especially if one begins a conversation about how it is pastorally applied to people who are hurting.

Not only do they seem to disagree with Jesus and Pope Francis, curiously they are also in dispute with Pope St John Paul II, whose neglected encyclical *Dives in Misericordia* (Rich in Mercy) also argues for the centrality of mercy.

Of course, the battleground of mercy has a longer history still. It involves an ancient and permanent fight between the God of mercy and a humanity forgetful of mercy received or mercy lived. That spiritual tussle goes on in every life, between a heart of stone and a heart of flesh.

It is captured beautifully in the Book of Jonah, the story of a fugitive who eventually decides to obey his call and preach repentance or destruction. But his God is made in

Jonah’s image, and so he gets angry with the intolerable mercy of God, even though in his rage he admits, ‘I knew you were a God of tenderness and compassion’.

The late Fr Michael Paul Gallagher SJ has pointed out that God responds to this infantile rage with a sense of humour. Jonah is soothed and delighted with the shade of a plant, but when it withers he enters another suicidal sulk. And the final words of this shortest of texts are an ironical and unanswered question challenging all our pettiness with the hugeness of God’s mercy: ‘Am I not right to have mercy on this city where people cannot tell their right hand from their left, to say nothing of the animals?’

For Fr Gallagher this sums up everything: if our picture of God is too small, our own mercy will be too mean. So we are on a long and permanent journey out of smallness and towards enlargement of heart.

How can we help heal the ‘Jonah syndrome’ within ourselves? The only really effective way is not more *words* but the *witness* of real mercy in action. Hearts are touched by images of dedication and compassion.

This is a key to the huge impact Pope Francis has had on the secular world. His words on mercy are strong but his

gestures of mercy are stronger. One has only to think of his long embrace of the man with the visibly terrible illness of the skin, an image that went 'viral', as they say.

We can never dare forget that Christ has told us plainly about the Last Judgement (see Matthew 25), and it has nothing to do with belonging to the right party, church or even being 'theologically' correct. We will be judged not on membership cards but according to our readiness to let the mercy of God pass through us to others. ■

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think about it

1. 'The spiritual tussle goes on in every life, between a heart of stone and a heart of flesh.' We are daily bombarded with images and events calling for our merciful response.
 - *As the people of a tender and compassionate God, how can we manage this challenge in practical ways?*
 - *Who are the witnesses of 'real mercy in action' in your parish community? Are there ways the good news of their efforts could be shared to inspire others? What might you do to facilitate this?*
2. Reflect on the past week – the normal comings and goings of your life. *Can you identify times you have allowed the mercy of God to pass through you to others? If so, when? If not, focus on this in the week ahead.*

Blessed are the pure of heart

FOR THEY SHALL SEE GOD

The emptiness of the desert makes it possible to learn the almost impossible: the joyful acceptance of our uselessness.

—Ivan Illich

It is hard for many of us to ‘see’ God these days. We are often overwhelmed and inundated with too much of everything: too many possessions, too much food, too much stimulation, too many activities, too much work, too much information, too many choices. As a consequence, most of us live scattered, hectic lives, racing from one task to another, juggling too many commitments, always living on the surface and never really knowing ourselves, or others.

Little wonder then that we easily become ‘blind’ to God’s presence deep within and all around us. Why? Perhaps because we lack a basic ‘purity of heart’.

What is this ‘purity of heart’ and who can teach us about it?

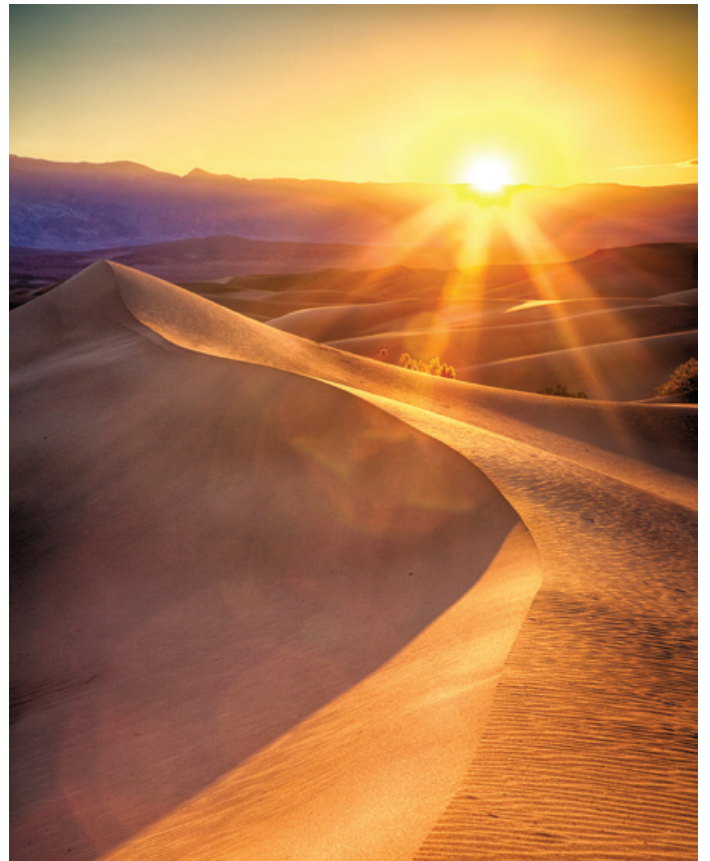
The spiritual theologian Belden Lane from the Jesuit University of St Louis once remarked:

To learn desire, one necessarily sits at the feet of those who are thirsty. The satisfied never make good teachers ... This is how the desert knows water—achingly, desperately, with a passion bordering on dread. It’s the only way we ever know God as well.

The experience and wisdom of the early Church’s Desert Mothers and Fathers has much to teach us in this regard. These ancient searchers literally fled cities into the ‘desert’ in their ‘thirst’ for God. It was common for them to suffer great interior tribulation and anxiety.

Many of them, however, attest to ‘seeing’ God anew with fresh eyes.

One of these Desert Fathers, St Isaac of Nineveh, wrote beautifully that purity of heart ‘is a heart full of compassion for the whole of created nature’. He continues:



And what is a compassionate heart? ... It is a heart which burns for all creation, for the birds, for the beasts, for the devils, for every creature. When he thinks about them, when he looks at them, his eyes fill with tears. So strong, so violent is his compassion ... that his heart breaks when he sees the pain and suffering of the humblest creature. That is why he prays with tears at every moment ... for all the enemies of truth and for all who cause him harm, that they may be protected and forgiven. He prays even for serpents in the boundless compassion that wells up in his heart after God’s likeness.

A more contemporary Desert Father was the Italian Carl Carretto — a follower of the desert mystic Charles de Foucauld. In 1964 he published his now classic book *Letters from the Desert*. Carlo recounts how he fell in love with the desert as a place of prayer and a place of truth. Ivan Illich’s foreword summarises Carlo’s message poetically:

We became friends. When he came to visit me he told me stories. Remembering them I always felt that outside the desert they would sound out of place. The immensity of the desert overwhelms both the power and weakness of men. The Muslim shepherd’s song envelops the Franciscan tenderness of Italian in the austerity of unambiguous faith. The emptiness of the desert makes it possible to learn the almost impossible: the joyful acceptance of our uselessness.

Blessed are the peacemakers

FOR THEY WILL BE CALLED CHILDREN OF GOD

'To be a witness does not consist in engaging in propaganda, nor even in stirring people up, but in being a living mystery. It means to live in such a way that one's life would not make sense if God did not exist.' —Cardinal Suhard

Some people try very hard to equate the word 'peace' with the naïve 'flower children' of the 1960s; to paint it as impractical, implausible, the stuff that fuzzyheaded intellectuals and radicals are made of.

But Jesus built his entire Gospel message on peace, and nowhere in his words or deeds did he even hint that war was actually the way of achieving it. Indeed, peace is the stuff of the four Gospels; a constant theme of the New Testament and the ultimate goal of two thousand years of Christian vision and witness.

One of the great witnesses to peace in our Catholic tradition is St Francis of Assisi. While many people associate St Francis with nature, not as many know the story of his voyage and witness to the Muslim world as a peacemaker.

It was the time of the Fifth Crusade, shortly after a Crusader victory at the port city of Damietta—modern Dumyat—on the Nile Delta. Francis, who opposed all killing no matter what the cause, sought the blessing of the cardinal who was chaplain to the Crusader forces to go and preach the Gospel to the sultan.

The cardinal told him that the Muslims understood only weapons and that the one useful thing a Christian could do was to kill them. At last the cardinal stood aside, certain that Francis and Illuminato, the brother traveling with him, were being led to die as martyrs. The two left the Crusader encampment singing the psalm, 'The Lord is my shepherd'.

For a month Francis and the sultan met daily. Though neither converted the other, the sultan had such warmth for



Picture © Br Robert Lentz, OFM, Courtesy of Trinity Stores, www.trinitystores.com

his guests that he not only spared their lives but gave them a passport allowing them to visit Christian holy places under Muslim control, and presented Francis with a beautifully carved ivory horn which is now among the relics of the saint kept in the Basilica of Assisi. The two (Francis and Malik-al-Kamil, the Sultan) parted as brothers.

We too are called to be witnesses to peace in our daily lives. For in many ways we are living in 'war'. Often we can be at 'war' with ourselves, at 'war' with others, especially when we 'crusade' against people and see them as rivals and enemies.

A life of peace and nonviolence, however, means daily trying to make peace with ourselves and to cultivate an interior 'nonviolence'. We all need to take the inner journey with the saints and mystics. Then we discover that if we sit every day in quiet meditation and do something as simple as reading the Beatitudes of Jesus, a certain healing happens. A spring of peace wells up within us.

Our mission as *peacemakers* then follows. Among the things that Christ did not say in the Sermon on the Mount is, 'Blessed are those who prefer peace, wish for peace, await peace, love peace, or praise peace'. He blesses the makers of peace. He requires an active rather than a passive role.

One peacemaker who has lived this witness today is Jean Vanier—the founder of the *L'Arche* movement for people who are disabled. And we are all 'disabled' in one way or another!



©CMS photo/Roberto Escobar

Blessed are the persecuted

FOR THEIRS IS THE KINGDOM OF HEAVEN

'Martyrdom is a great gift from God that I do not believe I have earned. But if God accepts the sacrifice of my life, then may my blood be the seed of liberty and a sign of the hope that will soon become a reality ... A bishop will die, but the church of God—the people—will never die.' —Blessed Oscar Romero

At long last, Oscar Romero, the great martyred Archbishop of Central America, was beatified on 23 May 2015. The Church now officially recognises that Blessed Oscar Romero is a personification of this beatitude: Blessed are the persecuted.

An Archbishop in El Salvador, he was assassinated shortly after giving a sermon one Sunday because he advocated for the poor and those whose human rights were being violated in his country.

Archbishop Romero, like the former Cardinal Jorge Mario Bergoglio of Argentina (now Pope Francis), came to see anew that the preferential option for the poor was crucial to the witness of a renewed and authentic Church.

Because Romero made this choice, he suffered much from the fierce hatred of people with vested interests in seeking to maintain the unjust status quo in his country.

But I suspect that he felt an even more terrible inner agony, as he was tragically misunderstood by some within his own beloved Church. We now know this because of his published diaries. There, he acknowledged his fears and loneliness, especially the pain he felt from the opposition of his fellow bishops and the apparent distrust of some in Rome. Most of the then-fellow Bishops of El Salvador even boycotted Romero's funeral Mass in 1980.

We should never forget that Blessed Oscar Romero was but one of many who acknowledged with their lives that millions had died in Latin and Central America. The tragic history of the genocide of indigenous peoples in Latin America by so called 'Catholic' colonisers makes almost unbearable reading; let alone the scandal that even more millions continue to live desperately poor lives.

Why? Too often because people who called themselves Catholics made a 'god' of money. Many have paid, and are still paying, a heavy price for their courageous choice to

Blessed are you when people revile you

All of us want to be liked. We naturally fear rejection. Worse, it must be difficult to live in some cultures where people openly despise others because of their ethnicity or looks, or even religion.

Certainly some of us can remember when Irish Catholics of a previous generation in Australia were sometimes mocked and reviled in those more sectarian days.

It can't have been easy for them. Sadly, we can still witness the occasional resurfacing of such anti-Catholic feeling—even in contemporary, politically correct and 'tolerant' Australia.

Yes, it can be endured stoically—sure. But how can Jesus actually ask us to contemplate rejoicing when we are cruelly rejected?

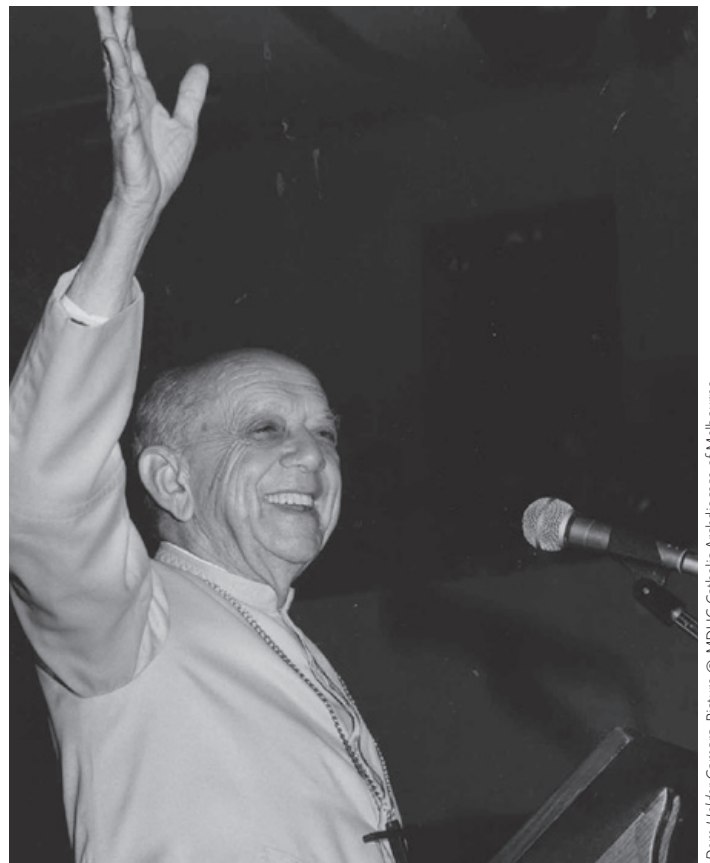
There is a strange yet wonderful story from *The Little Flowers of St Francis* that deals with this paradoxical Gospel challenge.

One winter's day St Francis was coming from Perugia with Br Leo, and the bitter cold made them suffer keenly. St Francis said:

Br Leo, even if the Friars Minor in every country give a great example of holiness and integrity ... nevertheless write down that perfect joy is not in that ... even if a Friar Minor gives sight to the blind, heals the paralysed, drives out devils, gives hearing back to the deaf, makes the lame walk, and restores speech to the dumb, and what is still more, brings back to life a man who has been dead four days, write that perfect joy is not in that.

Eventually, Br Leo in amazement asked Francis, 'Father, I beg you in God's name to tell me where perfect joy is'. And St Francis replied:

When we come to St Mary of the Angels, soaked by the rain and frozen by the cold, all soiled with mud and suffering from hunger, and we ring at the



Dom Helder Camara. Picture © MDHC Catholic Archdiocese of Melbourne

gate of the Place and the brother porter comes and says angrily 'Who are you?' And we say: 'We are two of your brothers.' And he contradicts us, saying: 'You are not telling the truth. Rather you are two rascals who go around deceiving people and stealing what they give to the poor. Go away!' He makes us stand outside in the snow and rain, cold and hungry, until night falls—then if we endure all those insults and cruel rebuffs with joy and patience, reflecting that we must accept and bear the sufferings of the Blessed Christ patiently for love of Him, oh, Brother Leo, write: that is perfect joy!

Perhaps this is a beatitude which cannot be so much rationally explained as experienced.

Theology is one thing but it is ultimately the stories of Spirit-filled persons who somehow live out this mystery that move us.

When I think of a witness of such Gospel 'perfect joy' in my life, I think immediately of Dom Helder Camara of Recife, who visited Melbourne 30 years ago in May 1985.

Dom Helder was a small man, just over five feet tall. His English was highly accented. But he was full of energy. His whole body was expressive of the energy of God in his heart.

A man of deep prayer, as bishop of Recife, in the poor north-east of Brazil, he took the side of the poor. He was such a threat to those in power that the Brazilian military government banned him from speaking publicly for 13 years and prohibited the media from mentioning his name.

He was above all a man of both prayer and action. He would rise at 2am to pray. He was an outspoken advocate



the *Blessing* of interruptions

A FINAL WORD

There used to be a poster years ago that said something like: 'Life is what happens to you while you're busy making other plans!' Many of us are indeed surprised when our planning goes awry and we are 'interrupted'. Perhaps it is this common experience that prompted Wendell Berry to write:

*It may be that when we no longer know what to do
we have come to our real work,
and that when we no longer know which way to go
we have come to our real journey.
The mind that is not baffled is not employed.
The impeded stream is the one that sings.*

Yes, confusion is normal. Perhaps the Freudian 'dictum' expressed colloquially that the best you can get in life (therapy) is to move from 'neurotic misery to ordinary unhappiness' has some inkling of truth in it!

I certainly used to think in the distant past that things would get 'clearer' one day. Now into my seventh decade on the planet, I am still waiting!

Reluctantly and very slowly I am learning to accept that the Spirit of God always works in very mysterious ways; at a pace very different from my own impatient heart and usually in the 'small still voice' of the 'little ones' of our planet. For the Holy Spirit often takes us in different directions from what we had 'hoped' for in our lives.

What we dreamed of in our youth has probably taken on another form later in life.

In our Church, some had high hopes for the renewal of the Church at Vatican II, which are not being realised in the way they had expected.

Some others grieve the loss of valuable aspects of our tradition which they believe have not been 'conserved'. But they too cannot control where the Spirit will lead us.

Surprises just happen—think of the marvellous interruption of grace of Pope Francis in our midst! No-one predicted that.

In our inner lives also—relationships we thought would last forever break down irretrievably and we are taken sometimes like the Apostle Peter 'where we do not want to go'.

Many of us can sometimes feel like the disciples at Emmaus; 'we had hoped' is our mantra!

And yet for us, as disciples of Jesus, 'interruption' is God's invitation. God is inviting us to see him all around us, in the lives of others, in our conversations, in our serving those in need.

Interruption is not simply a matter of developing patience in the heart of the Christian, it's about experiencing life! Interruption is perhaps God's way of encouraging us to go on 'pilgrimage'.

I take heart from Wendell Berry's poem, which suggests that it is precisely in life's interruptions and impediments that the Holy Spirit is at work.

For only the Gospel-bearer impeded and interrupted is strong, courageous and creative enough to sing. ■

*We must be ready to allow
ourselves to be interrupted
by God. God will be constantly
crossing our paths and
cancelling our plans by sending
us people with claims and
petitions. We may pass them
by, preoccupied with our more
important tasks ...
It is a strange fact that Christians
and even ministers frequently
consider their work so important
and urgent that they will allow
nothing to disturb them.
They think they are doing God
a service in this, but actually
they are disdaining God's
crooked yet straight path.*

—Dietrich Bonhoeffer, *Life Together*

Blessing

What is a blessing? A blessing is a circle of light drawn around to protect a person, heal and strengthen. Life is a constant flow of emergence. The beauty of blessing is its belief that it can affect what unfolds... A blessing awakens future wholeness... We could say that a blessing 'fore brightens' the way...

—JOHN O'DONOHUE,
'TO BLESS THE SPACE BETWEEN US'

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