
¹ When Jesus saw the crowds, He went up the mountain; and after He sat down, His disciples came to Him. ² Then He began to speak, and taught them, saying:

³ 'Blessed are the poor in spirit, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven.

⁴ 'Blessed are those who mourn, for they will be comforted.

⁵ 'Blessed are the meek, for they will inherit the earth.

⁶ 'Blessed are those who hunger and thirst for righteousness, for they will be filled.

⁷ 'Blessed are the merciful, for they will receive mercy.

⁸ 'Blessed are the pure in heart, for they will see God.

⁹ 'Blessed are the peacemakers, for they will be called children of God.

¹⁰ 'Blessed are those who are persecuted for righteousness' sake, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven.

¹¹ 'Blessed are you when people revile you and persecute you and utter all kinds of evil against you falsely on My account. ¹² Rejoice and be glad, for your reward is great in heaven, for in the same way they persecuted the prophets who were before you.

Matthew 5:1-12 (NRSV)

Currently in our normal Bible Readings the Church is hearing the story of Joshua leading the people into the Promised Land (First Reading for Proper 26A: Joshua 3:7-17: Crossing the Jordan to the Promised Land). When it comes to Joshua leading the people at this time in Israel's history, many of our Sunday School pictures have Joshua the leader as a younger man. But if Joshua was in his twenties or early thirties when he first spied in the Promised Land, then forty years later when he *began* leading the people, he would have been in his sixties or seventies! Think about also many of the Sunday School pictures of Daniel in the Lion's Den. Many of these also have pictures of Daniel as a younger man. But if Daniel was in his late teens when he was taken to Babylon, then Daniel would have been well into his eighties when he spoke up for the one true God and ended up in the lions' den.

What do this Bible accounts tell us about God's people? Obviously, you are never too old to serve the Lord, and be a great witness to Him! Of course, there are younger people who were called into the Lord's service. Jeremiah was perhaps 14 or 15 years old when called by God. Yet his prophetic ministry had to extend for many years. Jeremiah spoke well *before* the exile into Babylon. And he spoke for many years *during* the exile. He, too, was an old man speaking up for God.

Some question we may ask this day are: Who are God witnesses today? Are we ever too old to be a witness to Him? What does it mean to be a witness for God?

One of the key Bible words about ‘witnessing’ is *martyr*. We often understand a ‘martyr’ as “a person who is killed because of his or her religious or other beliefs.” Interestingly enough, the English word martyr is really a word transliterated from the original Greek *martyr*, which simply means “witness.”

What does it mean to be a ‘witness’ to God? In what we now often call the ‘Old Testament’ there are several words that can help our understanding. There is a word *moed* (מוֹעֵד) which is used to refer to the “meeting” place of God and His people (either at an appointed time/festival, or place). This meeting is *testimony* to a particular person or event, such as God or the giving of the covenant, and provides a place of testimony. The second Hebrew word ‘*ed*’ (עֵד) refers to the legal element of witness. One rendered testimony based on observation which was to be true and faithful. This is beautifully illustrated in Ruth 4:9-11 where Boaz called on the elders of the city to be witnesses to his act of redemption. In this last chapter of Joshua, Joshua also set up a memorial, *edah* (עֵדָה), to the commitment. This act of memorializing is also a witness and is commonly practiced in the Old Testament. The memorial is a witness response to both present and future generations of God's activity. In Psalm 119:1, the law is the supreme “testimony” or monument to God.

The legal concept of witness found in the Old Testament is continued in the New Testament. This aspect of witness, as well as new ones, is covered by the Greek word, *martureo* (and its derivatives). The legal sense of witness/testimony occurs during the trial of Jesus (Matthew 26:65 ; Mark 14:63 ; Luke 22:71). Paul use this word when he bore witness to the Galatians of their care for him (Galatians 4:15). Paul reminded Timothy not to act too hastily in accusing an elder without at least two or three witnesses (1 Timothy 5:19). And very importantly, Jesus is the supreme witness to God and His love (cf. John 1:1; 5:1; 8:1).

Believers were also challenged by Christ Himself to be His witnesses throughout the world (Acts 1:8). As Jesus had indicated earlier, this witness is informed and empowered by the Holy Spirit (John 15:26-27). Throughout the New Testament, believers are instructed that their witness is to be true and faithful, reflected both in speech and life-style (Acts 4:33 ; Acts 14:3 ; Hebrews 10:15-17 ; 1 Thessalonians 2:10).

When one looks at all of the various points above, one realises that ‘being a witness to God’ is both something that is significant and profound, but also something that is the grasp of every person in one way or another.

In our Holy Gospel for ‘All Saints’ this year (Matthew 5:1-12) Jesus speaks something about what it means to be a witness to Him. And He does so using the language of ‘blessing’. In our Western World today ‘blessing’ is very much associated with other things: things like having a good car, a nice home, a healthy family, lots of money, the ability to play sport, and other material things. And that is the trap we may fall into, even as Christian people. We anchor our sense of ‘blessing’ with material things. The trouble, then, is that when trouble

comes (or even affluence comes) we will struggle to give a good witness to the real blessings of God.

But can you see 'blessing' when you are down hearted or when you mourn the death of a loved one? Can you see 'blessing' when you have to put up with dominate worldly people who seem intent on enacting laws that are clearly contrary to God's Law? Jesus says: "*Blessed are you when people revile you and persecute you and utter all kinds of evil against you on my account. Rejoice and be glad, for your reward is great in heaven, for in the same way they persecuted the prophets who were before you.*"

As the Beatitudes suggest, God's values are not our values. In both the Beatitudes of need (verses 3-6) and the Beatitudes of Justice (verses 7-10), as well as the explanatory Beatitude of Persecution (verse 9) God turns our world on its head. Jesus says He will give us joy and gladness, even in times of trials and trouble. And the amazing thing is that Jesus' pronouncements of 'blessing' leads to rejoicing and gladness. People may praise God *when* they are poor in spirit. People may praise God *when* they mourn. People may praise God *when* they have to put up with the wrongs of this world. And people may praise God *when* they are persecuted for the faith. This is all because we know we have a special gift of life in Jesus. It is not that we pray to receive such things. Instead, when we are faced with such trials we know we have true 'blessing' from God.

The reality is that we cannot expect to be immune from trials, troubles, and challenges as Christians. But we know that even in the most difficult situations we are 'blessed'. We are 'blessed' not because 'blessing' comes from the trials and troubles themselves. We are blessed because we share in the gift of God's life God gives us in Jesus.

It is helpful for us to note that the beatitudes appear at the *beginning* of the Sermon on the Mount, before a single instruction is given, before there has been time for obedience or disobedience. If the blessings were only for the deserving, very likely they would be stated at the end of the sermon, probably prefaced with the conditional clause, "If you have done all these things." But appearing at the beginning, they say that God's favour precedes all our endeavours. When Jesus spoke of being 'Happy' or 'Fortunate' or 'Blessed' in difficult times or challenging circumstances He was not say we are 'Happy' or 'Fortunate' or 'Blessed' to endure such things. Rather, He was reminding His people that in such circumstances we have a greater blessing from God through the life of Christ Himself, who in the 'wisdom' of the cross has brought a true and great blessing for us all.

What does it mean to live a 'blessed' life? In our world we so often anchor our sense of blessing to things of this world, and this transitory life. But, there is an Arabic proverb that says, "All sunshine and no rain makes for a desert." This is true. We do not normally think of death as a 'blessing', but Jesus' death brought about new life and blessing. Jesus Himself has truly fulfilled these 'be-attitudes'.

In faith, when we remember those who have died this past year, we may also see these people among those who have been blessed. These are those who through faith, with all the saints before them, now join part of the heavenly host, and who together with us are 'witnesses' to Jesus. These are those who no longer experience 'death or mourning or crying or pain' (Rev.21:4). They too have received the life of Jesus. And – as we stand in the 'in-between time' between our first death (our baptism) and our second death (when we shall die) – we too share in the gift of life in Jesus.

There may be times in our lives when we may not *feel* blessed. But we have a blessing, nevertheless. Our true blessing is the gift of life and faith in Jesus. Our 'witness' is to the true 'blessings' we receive because of Jesus – in spite of the trials and troubles and persecutions we may experience. Let us treasure this gift of 'the kingdom of heaven.

There is a wonderful Bible verse that says, "God's greatest pleasure is to be with His saints" (Psalm 16:3). Our various Bible Readings this day (Revelation 7:9-17; Psalm 34:1-10,22; 1 John 3:1-3; Matthew 5:1-12) remind us that God is with us in the difficult moments of life – and He is present in person in Christ Jesus our Saviour. Our 'witness' to Jesus is to simply delight in that love, and acknowledge the true blessings we have because of Jesus.

You are more than you know when you share in that special gift of life in Jesus. And just as God sustained Joshua, Daniel, Jeremiah, and others in the faith, God will sustain you in every circumstance of life. And it is here that we live in our 'witness' to Him. We are 'witnesses' simply because it is His grace and love that takes effect in our lives through everything God has given us in Christ Jesus our Saviour. What a wonderful gift this is... Amen.

Holy and gracious God, God of promise and steadfast love, we give You thanks for the teaching of Jesus, Your Son and our Saviour. For the blessings we enjoy and the sufferings we presently endure, we give You thanks. For the promises by which we live and for the hope of glory we receive in faith, we give You thanks. Give us the sure confidence of Your strength in this present time, and the grace to await the coming of Your kingdom with anticipation and joy; through Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.