

On The Way

The Beatitudes: Blessed are those who mourn...

This Beatitude alerts us to the difference between blessedness and happiness. When we mourn we are by definition *not* happy. But we are blessed – or, rather, we *can* be if we mourn in the proper manner. Our Lord himself weeps at the tomb of Lazarus (Jn 11:35) and over the impending destruction of Jerusalem (Lk 19:41-44). He thus teaches that mourning is an aspect of the Christian life.

The capacity to mourn shows an appreciation for the goodness of the created world. Because we see the goodness of God's creation, we are saddened by the wounds inflicted on it. We mourn the fallen world. We mourn, first and most of all, the effects of sin – of our own and those of others. The world is wounded because of man's primordial rebellion against God. It is further wounded by our own participation in that rebellion. As a result, there is a sadness to all creation, which was "made subject to futility" (Rom 8:20). Blessed are those who recognize both the original goodness of the world and its subsequent wounds.

Now, *how* we mourn makes all the difference. Saint Paul describes two different kinds of sorrow: "godly" and "worldly" (cf. 2 Cor 7:9-11). The first kind is a participation in Christ's own sorrow over the fallen world. It produces "a salutary repentance without regret." By this sorrow, we see the tragedy of the world, we acknowledge our role in it, and we reform our lives accordingly. The second kind of sorrow is a self-centered sadness. It focuses only on what we lose and thus "produces death."

This is the second "detachment" beatitude. The first, to be poor in spirit, requires detachment from the world's wealth and goods. After all, poverty of spirit is impossible without some poverty of wallet. Likewise, mourning requires detachment. To mourn means to experience sorrow when we detach ourselves from the pleasures of this world for the sake of Christ. Every Lent we experience this kind of sorrow when we give up something, when we detach ourselves from some legitimate pleasure. There's a certain sadness in our not being able to eat or drink or watch what we'd like. But we don't experience this as a bad sorrow because we know the renunciation is leading us closer to Christ.

The crucial distinction between Christian sorrow – mourning – and worldly sadness is that the former looks for better things to come and the latter focuses only on what's lost. Christians mourn the woundedness and the passing nature of God's creation. But we do not "grieve like the rest, who have no hope" (1 Thess 4:13). We mourn as those who look ahead to a greater thing than this world. Even in the midst of our mourning, we know that the passing of this world makes room for the advent of something greater. Thus, those who mourn will be consoled; they will receive what they await.

Saint Augustine associates this beatitude with the Holy Spirit's gift of *knowledge*, which enables us to assess the things of this world from God's point of view. From that perspective, we perceive not only that worldly things are temporal and passing but also that they can often become obstacles to our growing in the likeness of Christ. Knowledge enables us to see both the goodness and the passing nature of this world, and thus to mourn.