



Reverend Giuseppe Mattei (February 16, 2025)

There is a 1954 Bing Crosby and Danny Kaye movie my family enjoys watching at Christmas time: *White Christmas*. One of the songs Crosby sings with Rosemary Clooney is Irving Berlin's "Count your Blessings (Instead of Sheep)." It's a wise exercise to be cognizant of and grateful for them. Besides helping us fall asleep, counting our blessings helps us to focus on the positives rather than dwelling on the negatives in life.

Common sense would also have us hope that if we do good, we receive good in return and if things go well for us it must be that God is blessing us. Well, that's not what I hear Jesus say today:

"Blessed are you who are *poor*, for yours is the kingdom of God. Blessed are you who are *hungry*...Blessed are you who *weep*...Blessed are you when people *hate* you, *exclude* you, *revile* you, and *defame* you on account of the Son of Man." (Luke 6:20-22)

Jesus looks at those who are poor, those who go hungry, those who are grieving, those who are maligned, marginalized and excluded and says that they are blessed...and *will* be vindicated. The weight we give to the future tense that closes each sentence is commensurate to the trust we have in God: God will be faithful as always and fulfil that promise.

Once Jesus is done addressing those experiencing the negatives of life, he turns to those who have the opposite experience: Are you enjoying wealth, popularity, respectability, or laughter in this current culture? Then you will want to reconsider your choices if you want to be part of God's reign.

Jesus doesn't curse people. He laments their ways and warns them of the troubles they'll get themselves into because of their total unawareness and lack of compassion and wisdom.

Does all this make sense? How can Jesus say that we should consider ourselves blessed when bad things happen to us?

I feel nervous when I consider Jesus' words of blessing and woe. I am not poor, nor hungry. I'm not being persecuted even though I have experienced tensions, persistent opposition and open antagonism. I have had moments of grief, who hasn't? But all in all, I can call myself fortunate compared to many others.

Jesus isn't talking to two different people. He is talking to me when I face life's challenges and feel anxious and tempted to despair. He reminds me to "be" with it, whatever "*it*" is.

Experiencing the crude reality of the moment without running away, without denying or rejecting it allows us to be present and responsive, upholding our values, practicing our faith, and trusting God's promises.

Jesus is not idolizing destitution, starvation, desolation or marginalization. He's talking about a mindset that seems to come most easily to people who hope, not from a position of strength, but from an awareness that God's future is better than anything we could ask or imagine. These are the people who welcome the free gifts of God every day, knowing that every gift is for the good of all. The future tense of his blessings challenge our compulsion to have our prayers answered immediately and our problems and conflicts resolved "now." The future for the woes grant time for conversion.

Jesus is talking to me when I am so full of myself that I can't hear and see those who suffer around me. He is talking to me when I consider myself above others, and, totally disconnected from them, I am incapable of understanding, refusing any empathy and compassion. This is when I "other-ize" the other. The other becomes a nuisance, an enemy to defeat and a problem to eliminate. Smugness demeans and hurts others. It renders life miserable and unbearable. This, Jesus says, is not the kind of life you want for yourself. You will ultimately be the one suffering.

So, **who am I?**

If I am not hurting, if I have nothing to complain about, if I am content with the status quo, then Jesus is addressing his woes to me. He must be wondering if I am so blind and insensitive to other people's needs, other people's struggles and despair.

If I do not hunger for justice for those whose life is hard - the impoverished, the afflicted, the forgotten, the unjustly incarcerated - but only care about enjoying the pleasures of life, then who am I?

If I don't share the burden of those who go hungry, are naked, have no shelter, then who am I?

If I feel no outrage at human right abuses, if I am indifferent toward those who are displaced because of war, crime or environmental degradation, then who am I?

If I don't feel distressed when I see families being separated, people uprooted from their communities and churches, and children being torn from their parents' arms, then who am I?

If I am preoccupied solely about saving my skin, not making waves, not offending people, not speaking the truth, then who am I?

If I don't feel the urgent need to participate in finding solutions for the imbalances of the world, then who am I?

If I want to go along with **Jesus' plan**...

How can I train myself to see people, love them and be there for them?

How can I train myself to stop living in fear and come out from the safety of the high wall of separation I have raised? How can I start living with trust and confidence?

What will help me to become more sensitive to the cry of the poor, the afflicted, the hungry, the refugee, the persecuted?

Jesus says loving God, listening to and practicing God's Word is the first step. And then loving myself, really paying attention to my longings and my fears. Paying attention to God present in me and beyond me opens me to a deeper and truer reality.

To recognize the divine within ourselves and in others, we must cultivate humility and openness. Jesus' teachings invite us to embrace vulnerability, to soften our hearts, and to dismantle the barriers that separate us from one another. When we can see the face of God in every person, especially those who are marginalized and suffering, we begin to live out the true essence of our faith. It is in this sacred encounter with the divine, within us and around us, that we find genuine peace and fulfillment. For this we pray when we say: "Your kingdom come on Earth as it is in heaven."

Jesus' resurrection must count for something as Saint Paul reminds us. If we say it didn't happen, then we are stuck in the hopelessness of our sins.

But if we believe in the resurrection from the dead, then we live in hope and our life takes a different shape: we don't live in fear anymore. We don't live in isolation either, and pay attention to those around us beyond ethnic, national, religious, and gender identifiers. When we live in faith, we see all creation as one, all creation in the One and the One in all creation.

Let the blessings of the Lord strengthen our resolution to love God and neighbor trusting that when we love we are on God's side and God is with us: we can live a resurrected life. We can endure and persevere in faith. May God bless us. Amen.