Beatitudes Times Four

Have you ever noticed that you can hear or read the same passage from the Bible a dozen times or more, and yet still find new insights and different ways to hear it with each reading? That’s because the Word of God, living and effective (to use St. Paul’s phrase) isn’t just a series of words on the page. The living and effective part comes through the interaction of the Gospel story and what’s happening inside of us. Often, as the Gospel takes root in us, we find deeper and deeper meaning in the stream of God’s grace that flows through God’s holy Word.

So how do you hear the Beatitudes? As with any scripture, and perhaps even more so, how we hear them depends in part on what is happening in our life at the time. Be assured, the Holy Spirit can definitely use our questions and reactions as an avenue into the truth.

But since there are so many of us, with so many different things happening in each of our lives, impacting what the Beatitudes are saying to us, it would be hopeless to try to capture it all. To simplify, let me outline four broad ways we can hear this Gospel, and then wrap up with how the saints and the Beatitudes interact. After all, they are the blessed!

So four broad perspectives.

In the first broad way, we could keep our distance. We view the whole scene from the back of the crowd. It’s possible to attend Mass that way too, as a casual onlooker. In the case of the Beatitudes, we could just see it as another scene from Jesus’ life. “Isn’t he a great and encouraging teacher? These Beatitudes are really something! Wish I had been there.” Hearing that way is better than not listening at all, but just barely. It is a starting point we may all have to take, but after listening, we are still pretty much the same as we were before. The message goes in one ear and out the other without hitting much in between. No transformation. No amazing grace. No real joy of the Gospel.

Many of us find that to get more out of the Beatitudes, we can listen as someone in the crowd, but not just anyone; someone whose ears are straining to take it all in. “I think he may have a message for me today!” Better yet, we try to identify with a specific person or life circumstance. How would a person who had been through really tough times, lots of suffering, feeling abandoned and really empty hear the first beatitude? Blessed are the poor in Spirit. Blessed are they who mourn. “My husband was arrested by the Romans on trumped up charges. The trial was a farce. He was condemned, executed. I’m despairing. I grieve my husband. I also grieve the brokenness, the evil, the sin in the world that is behind this. Eventually, my own limitations and sinfulness come to mind, and mourn that as well. There is a blessing for me in all this? I suppose it does lead me to grasp for forgiveness, and there is comfort in God’s mercy.”

We could walk through each beatitude that way.
Moving to yet a third way of hearing this Gospel – we could try to put it all together. Rather than take beatitudes one at a time, look at the whole message. “This message really is a very different way of understanding the world, and of understanding life. Who could find a blessing in all of these things that the world around us counts as curses, things to avoid? Who could find the victory of blessedness in heaven in being humble, or poor in spirit, or in mourning, or hungering and thirsting for righteousness; who could snatch victory, blessedness from persecution? Jesus, who else? If I really spend time reflecting on these beatitudes, they will help me really know Jesus. Really know him, as he is, not as I would like him to be. I can sense his spirit through these beatitudes, what drives him, I can get a glimpse into his heart. He really does have a different way of experiencing the world. And I’m beginning to realize, it’s NOT foolishness --- thinking pride will lead to happiness is the real foolishness. Its humility that can bring real joy. Grieving sin, like Jesus weeping over Jerusalem; it gave him the impetus to embrace the cup of suffering and redeem the world. Hungering for what is right with God; it led to Jesus healing, forgiving, feeding, giving life. Conflict and suffering come when everyone is always looking out for themselves, the opposite of the beatitudes!”

So the third way to hear the Beatitudes is see them as helping us know and love Jesus, to draw closer to him, to let him change us through love. Now we are talking about real power and blessing.

The fourth way to hear the beatitudes is the way I believe the saints heard them. Many saints, I know, began in the back of the crowd. We probably all do. If that’s where we are, it is OK, so long as we realize that it is the beginning of the journey, not the end. Something led the saints to realize Jesus was talking to them. Then they realized these Beatitudes reveal Jesus, they are a glimpse into his heart, his insight into the way of God, they are the path he walked, and the path he invites us to walk with him. From there, they moved to a fourth way to hear the Beatitudes. “This is the path to being a disciple, the path to sainthood! Sure, perhaps life circumstance have left me feeling poor in spirit. Jesus has taught me that this state I want to escape at any cost can actually hold a hidden blessing, and can be my path to sainthood. But I don’t identify with some of the beatitudes. Who wants to hear about being persecuted? What does that have to do with me? Or, maybe I am not mourning right now. In the fourth way, realizing these are the blueprint for discipleship, I need to consider how I can mourn my sins, and those of the world, even if it isn’t the beatitude that draws me. Maybe I can’t identify a place right now where I need to be a peacemaker. Could be I’m not looking hard enough. Peacemaking is an important part of the package. And how can anyone deny how much this world needs peacemakers! Lord, help me see where I can bring peace.”

In the fourth way of hearing the Beatitudes, it may not be the ones we are most comfortable with that we need to focus on. We might need to explore the ones we don’t identify with, the ones we would rather drop from the list. Now there is the power of transformation. Accepting not just the hope and affirmation Jesus offers, but accepting the challenge as well.
The joy comes from discovering just how we can become more holy, more blessed, further on the path to sainthood each and every day. As we do, the world we are living in starts to take kingdom shape. Believe me, letting the Lord transform us to see blessings and become a blessing for others; letting him shape us into saints – now THERE is a joy we’ll never find anywhere else.

Whether we are starting from the back of the crowd, overhearing but not REALLY listening, moving in from the back and starting to see some blessedness in our own trials and tribulations, or walking the beatitudes with Jesus, the saints can spur us on. That’s why we celebrate the individual memorials of so many of them, and why we have a big feast to celebrate them all.