November 1: All Saints (Mt 5:1-12a)

**BLESSED ARE THE POOR IN SPIRIT**

If our Lord hadn't told us, we could never have believed it: the fortunate ones in God's eyes are the poor. "How happy are the poor in spirit; theirs is the kingdom of heaven" (Mt 5:3). "O the happiness of the poor in spirit, because even now they possess God."

Who should ever have guessed that the poor head the list of heaven's citizens?

Of course, we have our own idea of poverty. "Poverty" is a nasty word. Poverty must be stamped out at all costs. We flatter no one by enthusing over his or her poverty.

We associate poverty with those who are backward and lazy, even grubby and smelly. We don't care to identify the stench of poverty with the odour of sanctity. Yet, our Lord seems to do just that, and furthermore he calls the poor, "happy, fortunate, blessed."

But he hasn't that sort of poverty in mind. For Jesus, poverty of spirit begins with a disillusionment, a dissatisfaction with material good fortune, and with anything else that this world can offer.

The poor in spirit don’t deny all the positive values in life, but they have come to be dissatisfied with material wealth. They recognise the fickleness of human favour. They have gone through painful periods of frustration, because the world could offer them no true satisfaction.

Fortunately for them, and here's how the poor in spirit are blessed; they didn't continue in frustration, but they made a direct turn towards God. When they were empty, disillusioned, frustrated and in great need, then they were perfectly disposed to turn to God.

That's why the poor in spirit are blessed, that's why they're so fortunate. We never go all out for something unless we need it ‑ and the poor in spirit need God. Their extreme poverty leads them to God, their only hope. Their need opens them to God and makes room for God.

As an example of poverty of spirit, we most often turn to Jesus or to St Francis for inspiration. My own experience of these examples is that we are conditioned to them and smother their harshness with a coating of sugared piety. So, we swallow them without discomfort.

There was a doctor living in Germany in 1945 who dared to criticise the Nazi regime, and he was sentenced to death. He had no idea when he was to be executed, but he was allowed write to his wife occasionally, and so he could unburden his heart to her.

Here is an example of a man who was wealthy, successful and educated, who had friends, a wife and family, who started out from disillusionment towards poverty of spirit.

He wrote from prison in an early letter to his wife: "Never have I prayed with such fervour. If only God in his mercy were to hear our urgent prayers! Everything in me that has been sham and lukewarm, I shall cast off. Never in my life have I experienced the power and grace of prayer as I do now. And yet, despite all this, there are hours of deep depression which must be faced and lived through in utter loneliness."

At that stage, he realised that God alone could satisfy his needs. But he was still impatient and lacked complete trust in God, since a lack of trust can bring on depression.

Two months later, he wrote: "I have become much quieter of late. I have entrusted my life to God entirely. I had done this from the beginning, but it is only now in my suffering that it has been granted to me to surrender, not only in prayer, but with my whole being."

Here is true poverty of spirit, and this man was truly fortunate to have achieved it in those circumstances. He is happy, and at peace with himself and God. Some others in the same situation despaired and took their own lives.

He wrote his last letter to his wife an hour before his execution. “At three o'clock, I must die. Now the hour has come which God in his infinite love has decreed for me. In one hour, I will pass over into the glory of the living God.

 “I have given myself entirely to God. In his hands I am secure. The eight months of preparation for eternity were hard but wonderful none the less. I must enter now by the narrow gate of the guillotine."

For ourselves, we may never have to go through that kind of test. But we still have our disillusionments and frustrations. We know that this isn't good. We say to ourselves that frustration is bad and that we must snap out of it.

But frustration isn't necessarily bad. It's a signpost that points directly to God. If we misread the signpost, then we're in trouble. We're supposed to recognise frustration as part of God's plan for us.

How fortunate we are if we know for a fact that nothing and no one can satisfy us but only God. Our hearts can't rest until they rest in him.