

WHAT DOES THE HUMAN PERSON SEEK BUT JOY?

Introduction

Do you want to be happy for a few hours? Get drunk. Do you want to be satisfied for some years? Grab the pleasures that life gives you. Qohelet himself suggests: “*Go, eat your bread with joy and drink your wine with a merry heart ... and spare not the perfume for your head. Enjoy life with the wife you love, all the days of the vain life granted you under the sun*” (Ecl 9:7-9).



But how to be happy always? Joy is not identified with the pleasure that, although loved and blessed by God, is temporary and fleeting, often leading to sadness and disappointment. “*Even in laughter the heart may be sad, and the end of joy may be sorrow*” (Prov 14:13).

The Bible guarantees a paradox: true and lasting joy is born of commitment, renunciation, self-denial, sacrifice, and accompanied by pain. “*Now I am glad to suffer for you,*” says Paul to the Colossians (Col 1:24). To persecuted Christians, James recommends: “*My brethren, consider it as the greatest happiness to have to endure various trials*” (James 1:2). And Peter recognizes: “*You ... rejoice with an indescribable and glorious joy*” (1 Peter 1:8).

What is the secret of this joy? Jesus reveals it: “*It is better to give than to receive*” (Acts 20:35). Those are not blessed who accumulate and selfishly retain goods for themselves, but who, after distributing them, become poor to help the needy. A bewildering proposition. Accepting it is risky, but He is the guarantor.

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“*Blessed is he who retains nothing for himself and becomes poor for love.*”

First Reading: Zephaniah 2:3; 3:12-13

Seek the Lord, all you humble of the earth, who have observed his law; seek justice, seek humility; perhaps you may be sheltered on the day of the Lord's anger.

But I will leave as a remnant in your midst a people humble and lowly, who shall take refuge in the name of the Lord: the remnant of Israel. They shall do no wrong and speak no lies; nor shall there be found in their mouths a deceitful tongue; they shall pasture and couch their flocks with none to disturb them.

There was a time when God seemed to have allied himself with the rich: welfare, fortune, an abundance of goods, numerous offspring were seen as signs of his blessing (Deut 28:1-14). Reading the Old Testament, we see that the Israelite's ideal was wealth, not poverty.

Little by little, however, the mentality of Israel changes, especially as a result of the preaching of the prophets. Many began to think that wealth, more than God's blessing, is often a source of problems, abuse, exploitation of workers, deception, skillful deception, and injustice. The poor are no longer considered unhappy because of their impiety but because they are victims in the hands of the powerful. To the unhappy, Micah cries out in indignation, “*stripping the skin of the body, the flesh of the bones*” (Mic 3:2).

Zephaniah lives a few years before the destruction of Jerusalem, in a period of social and political chaos. Although of bourgeois origin, the prophet goes against the dignitaries of the court, against the merchants, against the ungodly (cf. Zep 1:8-12), and against all those who perpetrate injustice. He threatens the imminent punishment of God and, as the last possibility of salvation, invites them to ‘conversion to the Lord.’

In today's reading, the prophet clarifies what it means and directs an invitation to all: “*Seek the Lord, all you humble of the land, who have observed his law; seek justice, seek humility*” (v. 3). To convert means becoming like the humble, like the poor. It is the first time in the Bible that the word ‘poor’ is used with a new connotation: it indicates a social and economic situation and an inner religious attitude. For Zephaniah, the poor are those who having no security, trust entirely in God and submit to his will.

On the day of punishment, says the prophet, God will allow a “*humble (poor) people without resources to survive in the land, a remnant of Israel who will seek refuge in the name of the*

Lord” (vv. 12-13).

After Zephaniah, this new meaning of the term ‘poor’ gave it a positive connotation. The spirituality of ‘poverty’ enjoyed an increasing development, giving rise to many Psalms in which the word ‘poor’ is used as a synonym for pious, just, God-fearing. It is in the context of this spiritual movement that we must place the message of Jesus.

Second Reading: 1 Corinthians 1:26-31

Consider your own calling, brothers and sisters. Not many of you were wise by human standards, not many were powerful, not many were of noble birth. Rather, God chose the foolish of the world to shame the wise, and God chose the weak of the world to shame the strong, and God chose the lowly and despised of the world, those who count for nothing, to reduce to nothing those who are something, so that no human being might boast before God. It is due to him that you are in Christ Jesus, who became for us wisdom from God, as well as righteousness, sanctification, and redemption, so that, as it is written, “Whoever boasts, should boast in the Lord.”

We learned last Sunday what the problems of the community of Corinth were: discord, division, envy, jealousy. How could they have fallen so low in such an initially vibrant community? Paul responds by saying that it happened because the destructive spirit of competitiveness has infiltrated the community, resulting in each seeking to dominate others, be superior, and be ‘rich.’

How does God judge those who behave like this? The reading indicates his preference: God does not choose the rich, but the poor, the marginalized, those who count for nothing. To prove this, Paul argues that it is enough to consider the provenance of the members of the community of Corinth: there are no nobles, few are wealthy, aristocrats, scholars, or gifted with a great culture. Almost all are poor; some live in misery. This is a sign of the preference of God, who chooses the little ones and shows an appreciation for the insignificant in the eyes of the world to enrich them with gifts.

Gospel: Matthew 5:1-12a

When Jesus saw the crowds, he went up the mountain, and after he had sat down, his disciples came to him. He began to teach them, saying: “Blessed are the poor in spirit, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven. Blessed are they who mourn, for they will be comforted. Blessed are the meek, for they will inherit the land. Blessed are they who hunger and thirst for righteousness,

for they will be satisfied. Blessed are the merciful, for they will be shown mercy. Blessed are the clean of heart, for they will see God. Blessed are the peacemakers, for they will be called children of God. Blessed are they who are persecuted for the sake of righteousness, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven. Blessed are you when they insult you and persecute you and utter every kind of evil against you falsely because of me. Rejoice and be glad, for your reward will be great in heaven.”

A human being has always cultivated a desire to meet God, question him, know his thoughts, and discover his plans. How to find him? Where can we meet him? In ancient times, it was believed that the ideal place would be on the peaks of the mountains. All nations had their sacred mountains—meeting places between heaven and earth, the abode of the gods and goal of human ascent—for the Greeks, Olympus; for the inhabitants of Mesopotamia, Ararat; for the Ugarits, the Tzaphon.

Israel also shared this belief. Abraham, Moses, and Elijah had their strongest spiritual experiences on the mountains of Moria, Horeb, and Mount Carmel. Matthew places the first discourse of Jesus on the mountain. Christian devotion has identified this place as the hill overlooking Capernaum.

The nuns who guard it have turned it into an oasis of peace, meditation, and prayer. Strolling under the majestic trees, greeted by the rustle of leaves blowing in the breeze coming down from the snowy peaks of Lebanon, contemplating from above the lake that Jesus and his disciples crossed so many times, naturally prompts the eyes to lift up to the sky and think of God. No matter how impressive this experience is, the mountain referred to by Matthew should not be understood in a geographical sense but its theological significance. More than a real place, ‘the mountain’ in the Bible refers to any place or time when we dispose ourselves to meet the Lord and to accept his word.

We can visualize the scene. Jesus detaches himself from the plain, a symbol of the society where—in the words of the Ecclesiaste—“*all that is done, all that succeeds, results from rivalry with the neighbor: all is meaningless and chasing the wind*” (Ecl 4:4). He climbs the mountain where the judging criteria and proposed models of life are radically different: those of God.

The value scale established on the plains is, in broad terms, as follows: first health, then family, professional success, flush bank account, and good friends. Even God and the saints—of course—are ranked, but nearer the bottom, as helpful supports of more immediate values that are really at heart.

Will the person who lives his own life according to these ideals be successful? What does God think of it? To avoid the risk of focusing on disappointing goals and wasting our existence, it is

necessary to confront his judgment. Which scale of values is proposed on the mountain? Today's liturgy invites us to reflect on the proposals of blessedness made by Jesus. They are those that the saints in heaven have put into practice and that the saints of earth, encouraged by their example, are recommended to follow.

Blessed are the poor in spirit

It is hard to say in how many ways this beatitude has been interpreted. Someone referred to the miserable, the beggars; the exploited as if they were the kind of people God is pleased with and therefore should be left in their wretched state. Indeed, it should be ensured that all become like them! This is, of course, an absurd, deviant interpretation. The humanity dreamed by God does not include his poor children, but one in which "*no one is poor*" (Acts 4:34).

Others believe that the 'poor in spirit' are those who, while maintaining the possession of their property, are detached from them and generous in bestowing offerings on the less fortunate. But alms—even recommended in some (rare) biblical texts—do not introduce into the world the 'new justice'; they do not solve the root problem of the equitable division of assets because the concept presumes the existence of the rich and poor on earth.

The principle of 'to each his own' that establishes our justice seems wise and sensible. But it too stems from a false premise and is derived from the assumption that something belongs to a person, while, in fact, everything is of God: "*The Lord's is the earth and its fullness, the universe and its inhabitants*" (Ps 24:1). A person is only an administrator of goods, and they will be called to render an account of this administration.

The evil instincts of possessing, accumulating, and using goods only for self come from the misguided relationship with this world's goods. All the evil: wars, violence, disagreements, and jealousy ensue from there (1 Timothy 6:10). Therefore, the whole of creation is "*groaning in pain and begs to be renewed and redeemed*" (Rom 8:19-25).

All possessive adjectives that we use express an erroneous conception of reality: if all is God, it makes no sense to talk about mine or yours, or even of ours, because everything is of the creator. The biblical image of the world is that of the banquet hall where the Lord calls each of his children from the moment he calls them into life. The person is a table companion who rejoices with the brothers/sisters for the gifts that the Father freely makes available to all. Whoever manages them as their property commits theft? Life itself does not belong to the human being; it is of God and is a gift that must be offered for love.

In respect of goods, Jesus never assumed the attitude of contempt that characterized the cynical philosophers. For them, 'dishonest wealth' also becomes good when distributed to the poor (Lk 16:19). However, although Jesus never condemned it, he regarded it as a threat, "*an*

obstacle—insurmountable for many to enter the kingdom of heaven” (Mt 19:23). The more a person is favored, the more goods they have, the more they are tempted to tie their heart to them, keep them for themselves and employ them selfishly.

From those who want to follow him—from those who want to be holy—Jesus asks for total detachment. *"None of you may become my disciple if he/she doesn't give up everything he/she has"* (Lk 14:33). In the context of this essential requirement to share all that is available to us from God, the beatitude should be read.

Jesus does not exalt poverty as such. By adding the ‘in spirit,’ he clarifies that not all the poor are blessed. By free choice, only those who strip themselves of all and manage their assets according to God’s plan are blessed. The poor in spirit decide not to possess anything for themselves and make available to others all that they receive. Mind you: the poor, according to the Gospel, are not those who have nothing, but those who do not keep anything for themselves.

Whoever has more is considered wealthy, but not if they become haughty, humiliate the less gifted, or use their assets to oppress others. Whoever spends themselves for others and puts themselves at the service of those who need is truly poor in spirit. Someone miserable need not be ‘poor in spirit.’ They are not if they curse themselves and others; attempt to improve their condition with violence or deceit; think only of themselves and lose interest in others, or cultivate the dream of rising to the prestigious position of the rich.

Voluntary poverty is for all. The renunciation of the selfish use of all property is not optional, not a counsel reserved to some who want to be heroes or more perfect. This is what distinguishes a saint, every Christian.

The promise that accompanies the beatitude does not refer to a distant future. It does not guarantee entry into heaven after death but announces an immediate joy: for theirs is the kingdom of heaven. From the moment we choose to become and remain poor, we enter the ‘kingdom of heaven’ and belong to the saints' family.

This beatitude is not a message of resignation. Still, of hope: no one will be in need when all become ‘poor in spirit,’ when they put the gifts they have received from God at the service of others, as does God, ‘the Holy One’ who, while possessing everything, is infinitely poor: he holds nothing back, gives everything, even his Son.

Blessed are those who suffer

For centuries in the Church, an asceticism that exalted pain as a means of uniting ourselves more closely to the suffering of Christ was preached. It attracted legions of saints and awakened precious spiritual energies, but it has also spread the mistaken belief that suffering is pleasing to God. It is not. Suffering dehumanizes, and the Lord cannot be pleased with an offer that

disfigures the face of his children. Jesus—quoting the prophet Hosea—said that God desires love, not sacrifice (Mt 9:13).

What does he mean then when he proclaims, blessed are the ‘afflicted?’ The term he uses is well known to those familiar with the Bible. The ‘afflicted’ spoken of in the book of the prophet Isaiah are those who do not have a house to live in, no fields to cultivate because strangers have usurped the legacy of their fathers. They are those who have to put themselves at the service of unscrupulous landowners; suffer injustice, abuse of power, embezzlement and humiliation (Is 61:7).

To these brokenhearted, who sit on ashes, wearing mourning garments (Is 61:3), the prophet addresses a message of hope. God—he assures—is about to intervene, he will reverse the situation and eliminate the causes of mourning: “*cheer up those who mourn in Zion, give them a garland instead of ashes, oil of gladness instead of mourning, and festal clothes instead of despair*” (Is 61:3).

In the synagogue at Nazareth, Jesus applied this oracle to himself. He proclaimed that he had come to fulfill this promise of God (Lk 4:21). The ‘afflicted’ that heaven regards as blessed are attentive and sensitive to the big cry of pain that rises from the world. “*They weep with those who weep*” (Rom 12:15) but do not resign themselves in the face of evil and suffering. They expect salvation from God and his word.

They will be comforted in the Kingdom of God—of which Jesus, the Holy One, has laid the foundation and that the saints have worked together to build. There, all the situations of pain and tears will be erased.

Blessed are the meek

The adjective ‘meek’ evokes the idea of a resigned person who does not react to provocation and passively accepts injustice without complaint. Is this the person who shuns every conflict (revealing a weak personality) who is beatified? The term ‘meek’ used by Jesus is taken from the Old Testament and, more precisely, from (Ps 37, where those deprived of their rights and liberty are called ‘the meek ones.’ They are poor because the powerful have stolen their fields, houses, and even sons and daughters. They are forced to suffer injustice without protest.

They do not give up, but they refuse to resort to violence to restore justice. They do not let themselves be guided by anger; they do not feed the resentment and the desire for revenge. They trust in God and await the coming of his Kingdom. However, theirs is not passive waiting as that of those waiting for the bus; it is active; it translates into concrete commitment.

Jesus is the model of true meekness (Mt 11:29; 21:5). He certainly was not a weak, timid, or shy person. He experienced dramatic conflict but confronted it with the characteristics of the

heart that describe the ‘meek ones.’ He repudiated violence, loved those who opposed it—by being patient, tolerant, and becoming the servant of all.

Holy are those who cultivate the dreams of God on earth and, with Jesus—the Holy One—undertake to achieve them, giving evidence against those who oppose them, with the same ‘meekness’ of the Master. The Promise: they will inherit the earth. They will receive from God a new land; they will build with him a new world, genuinely human.

A dream? Yes, but God and the saints do not allow themselves to be persuaded by the evil one who tries to convince them that God's promises will never come true. They do not resign themselves to the often-bleak reality in which they are called to operate and maintain firmly that hope which Paul qualifies with the Greek term *hupomoné*, the characteristic of semi-precious stones that resist any pressure (1 Thessalonians 1:3).

Blessed are those who hunger and thirst for righteousness

Hunger and thirst are the most basic biological needs. With the same passion—Jesus recommends—his disciples should hunger for ‘justice.’ What is justice? Human justice states that all people are treated according to what they deserve: the good people are rewarded; the guilty are punished and the innocent released. ‘Executing justice’ is synonymous with sending someone to the gallows.

Is this the justice for which we must hunger and thirst? The adjective ‘just’ can be applied to God, but with great caution, because it runs the risk of transforming the Lord into a judge and guarantor of morality with promises of reward and the threat of punishment. The Bible often speaks of God’s justice, but always and only as a synonym of kindness, never in the sense of our distributive justice. God is just, not because he compensates according to merit, but because, with his love, he makes righteous those who are evil. He is just because “*he desires all people to be saved and to come to the knowledge of the truth*” (1 Tim 2:4).

For us, ‘justice is done’ means that the culprit is punished. For God, justice is done when he manages to make the wicked righteous or when he saves a sinner from the abyss of guilt. Nobody has longed a much for this justice to be established in the world as Jesus has. To the disciples who invited him to eat, he replied: “*My food is to bring to completion the work of him who sent me*” (Jn 4:34). Only the righteousness of God could satisfy his hunger. He announced the word that made people just, and there were so many people who needed to hear it that he had no time even to eat (Mk 6:31). Saints are those who share with Jesus his hunger and thirst for the salvation of his brothers and sisters.

The promise: they shall be filled. They will experience—already here on earth—the joy of God and of the angels of heaven who have more joy over one sinner that is made just over

ninety-nine who do not need repentance (Lk 15:7).

Blessed are those who do works of mercy

This beatitude seems to fit within the conflict between patience and the desire to punish the culprit. It appears to be an invitation to let compassion and forgiveness prevail always. This is undoubtedly one of the aspects of ‘mercy’ and sits well with the recommendation of Jesus: “*Be merciful, just as your Father is merciful. Judge not lest you be judged: condemn not, and you will not be condemned: forgive, and you shall be forgiven*” (Lk 6:36-37). But this does not exhaust the richness of the biblical term.

In the Bible, ‘mercy,’ rather than a feeling of pity, is an action favoring those who need help. The clearest example is that of the Samaritan—the Greek text says—he has made mercy towards the man attacked by bandits (Lk 10:37).

The rabbis of Jesus’ time taught that God is merciful because he does works of mercy, and they specify: “*God clothed the naked—when he covered Adam and Eve with leaves*”; (Gen 3:21)—so you must clothe the naked. He visited the sick: In fact, he visited Abraham when he was suffering after his circumcision and visited the barren Sarah (Gen 18:1)—so you must visit the sick. He comforted those who were grieving—when he comforted Isaac after his father's death (Gen 25:11)—so you must comfort those who are suffering. He buried the dead—he was the one who buried Moses (Deut 34:6)—so you must bury the dead. Merciful are the saints who, faced with the needs of a person, feel the emotion of the heart of God and intervene, performing works of mercy, as God did.

The Promise: they will find mercy. In the new world, in the Kingdom of God, they too, when they need help, will meet brothers/sisters always willing to reach out to them, indeed, to give their lives to help them.

Blessed are the pure in heart

Purity was one of the most marked characteristics of the Jewish religion. Any contact with pagan cults, with something that might recall death and was unclean, had to be avoided. From this requirement of purity, there arose prohibitions, the detailed provisions of the rabbis obliging them to stay away from what was perceived as contrary to the holiness of God. Since transgressions were inevitable, it was necessary to obsessively resort to purification rites, ablutions, and sacrifices (Mk 7:3-4).

Jesus is not interested in these practices. He demands purity of heart. There is nothing external that makes a person unclean. Only what comes from the heart can make one unclean (Mt

15:17-20). The pure in heart are those who have an undivided heart and do not love both God and idols. A person, who serves two masters, whose conduct does not agree with the faith they profess, who loves God, but keeps resentment toward a brother or sister in their heart, who never commits a wrong action, but is adulterous in his heart, has an impure heart (Mt 5:28).

The promise: they shall see God. To them is given the blessed experience of trusting abandonment in the arms of God.

Blessed are those who are committed to peace

Among the works of mercy recommended by the rabbis of Jesus' time, bringing peace and reconstructing harmony among persons was the most respected. Every action that aims at restoring peace—it was said—attracts the blessings of God. Blessed is undoubtedly the one who, without resorting to violence, commits all their energy to put an end to war and conflict. Blessed are those who come between the contenders and try to convince them to dialogue, find harmony and establish peace.

But in the Bible, the word 'peace' (*shalom*) is not just the absence of war. It indicates total well-being, implies harmony with God, with others and with themselves, prosperity, justice, health, and joy. 'Peacemakers' are all those who are committed to making this life as suitable as possible for every person.

The most beautiful of the promises are given to these saints: God considers them his children.

Blessed are the persecuted for righteousness

Some disasters strike unexpectedly: fatality, illness, or misfortune can happen to anyone. Another suffering is the result of foolish or unethical behavior, and we tend to look for these! There is a third kind of tribulation: those we do not want. Still, we must consider—because they are an inevitable price to pay—if we choose to follow Christ.

Jesus did not delude his disciples; he has not promised honor or achievement, has not assured them of people's approval and consent, and insistently and repeated that adherence to him entails persecution: "*If the head of the family has been called Beelzebub, how much more the members of the family*" (Mt 10:25). And again: "*They will lay their hands on you and persecute you; you will be delivered to the synagogues and put in prison, and for my sake, you will be brought before kings and governors*" (Lk 21:12). "*When they persecute you in one town, flee to the next*" (Mt 10:23). The wisdom of God says: "*I will send prophets and apostles and these people will kill and persecute some of them. But the present generation will have to answer for the blood of all the prophets that has been shed since the foundation of the world*" (Lk 11:49-50).

Persecution is the uniform that distinguishes the disciple. Paul is explicit: “*All who want to serve God in Christ Jesus will be persecuted*” (2 Tim 3:12). How come? We would expect that a Christian—a messenger of peace and hope—is to be welcomed with open arms, joy and gratitude. Instead, the proclamation of the Gospel creates conflict. The reason is that the old-world order is incompatible with the Kingdom of God and does not give up peacefully. It reacts by attacking those it wants to have disappeared.

Christ paid with his life for being loyal to his mission, and his disciples must not expect any different treatment: “*A servant is not greater than his master. If they persecuted me, they will persecute you, too*” (Jn 15:20). The persecution of the righteous is often spoken of in the Old Testament. In the psalms, the righteous ask God: “*Deliver me from the grip of my persecutors*” (Ps 7:2); “*When will you judge my persecutors? When they persecute me, help me*” (Ps 119:84,86). Jeremiah is opposed, slandered, and imprisoned in a cistern.

In the Old Testament, however, persecution is considered bad, and the person who suffers it cannot be happy until God intervenes to end it. In the New Testament, the perspective changes. He who suffers for his fidelity to the Lord is proclaimed blessed by the very fact of being persecuted.

Persecution is not a sign of failure but success. It is a cause of joy because it is the proof of pursuing the right choice, according to the ‘wisdom of God.’ Inevitably, those who propose in a society based on the principles taught ‘on the mountain’ are persecuted. They introduce into the world the antibodies of service that attack the viruses of power. They do not give a chance to these viruses, although camouflaged or hidden under religious trappings, to survive.

Whoever feels their position and prestige is threatened by the coming of the Kingdom of God reacts with violence, if necessary. The saints never had an easy life: their fate was sealed when they agreed to act as lambs.

Subjected to persecution, they have not succumbed to the temptation to behave like wolves. They have not strayed from the behavior suggested by the Master: “*Love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you*” (Mt 5:44) and by Paul: “*Bless those who persecute you*” (Rom 12:14).

READ: The beatitudes are well known. They refer to qualities that make for a happier life and that are part of everyone’s experience.

REFLECT: The Greek word translated ‘blessed’ can also mean ‘happy.’ Jesus offers some helpful guides for happiness. The first three beatitudes and the final beatitude call for a person to be receptive in a time of need. The central beatitudes challenge the faithful to action. Think

about the beatitudes you already practice.

PRAY: Identify one beatitude that you need to have in your life. Pray that the Holy Spirit may help you with this.

ACT: Beatitudes are meant to be lived. Act on the one you have prayed for.

Fernando Armellini