

WORD OF LIFE

by Chiara Lubich

November 2003

“Blessed are the poor in spirit, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven.” (Mt 5:3)

Jesus had just begun his public life. He was calling people to a change of heart, proclaiming that the kingdom of God was at hand, and healing every kind of sickness and infirmity. Crowds had begun to follow him. He climbed up a hillside and, speaking to the people gathered around him, he outlined his program of how we should live, in what is called the “Sermon on the Mount.”

Jesus’ new approach is clear from his very first words. He proclaims as blessed not those who are rich, powerful and influential, but those who are poor, humble, small, pure of heart, those who weep and those who are oppressed. This turns completely upside down the common mentality, especially in our society that often exalts consumerism, hedonism, prestige... It’s the “Good News” brought by Jesus that gives joy and hope to the least. It makes us trust in the love of God who is close to us when we go through times of trial and suffering. The very first of the eight beatitudes already sums up the joy and salvation he is announcing. It guarantees the kingdom of heaven to those who are poor in spirit:

“Blessed are the poor in spirit...”

But what does “poor in spirit” mean? It means to be detached from our goods and possessions, from other people and from ourselves... In a word, it means to set aside whatever we have in our hearts that prevents us from being open to God and to his will. It also means to remove anything that prevents us from being open to our neighbors, making ourselves one with them, loving each one as we should. It means being ready to leave everything: father, mother, “fields” and country, if that is what God asks of us.

To be “poor in spirit” means to put our trust not in wealth, but in the love of God and his providence. Often we are “rich” with worries about our health, anxiety for our loved ones, apprehension about a job we have to do, uncertainty about how to act in a given situation, or fear for the future... All this can block us and make us close ourselves off, preventing us from being open to God and to our neighbors. But it is precisely in these moments of uncertainty that the “poor in spirit” believe in the love of God, cast every worry on him, and experience his fatherly love.

We are “poor in spirit” when we allow ourselves to be guided by love for others. Then we share with those in need and give them whatever we have: a smile, our time, our possessions, our abilities. Once we have given everything out of love, we are poor, that is, we are empty, with nothing of ourselves, free and with a pure heart. This poverty, which is the fruit of love, becomes in its turn the source of love: because we are empty of ourselves, and therefore free, we are able to welcome the will of God fully, without reservation, and to welcome every sister or brother we meet.

To those who live purity of heart and poverty of spirit in this way Jesus guarantees the kingdom of heaven. They are blessed, as he says...

“...for theirs is the kingdom of heaven.”

The kingdom of heaven cannot be bought with money nor can it be taken by force. It comes as a gift. For this reason, Jesus asks us to be like children, or like the poor who, just like children, need to receive everything from others. And the Holy Spirit, who is attracted by our emptiness of love, can fill our soul because he finds no obstacles that prevent full communion.

Those who are “poor in spirit” have everything, because they have kept nothing for themselves. They are poor of themselves and rich in God. Here too the Gospel message applies: *“Give, and it will be given to you.”*¹ We give whatever we have and we are given nothing less than the kingdom of heaven.

Here is the experience of a mother in Argentina:

“My mother-in-law was very fond of her son, my husband, so much so that she was jealous of me. This attitude always created problems between us and hardened my heart towards her. A year ago, she was diagnosed with cancer. Her only daughter was unable to give her the care she needed. For some time, I had been trying to live the words of the Gospel and they had changed my heart. I was learning to love. Overcoming my misgivings, I asked my mother-in-law to come and stay with us. I began to see her with new eyes and to love her. It was Jesus I was helping and serving in her.

“She was not indifferent to my love. To my great surprise, she responded to every gesture of mine with an equal amount of love. The grace of God worked the miracle of reciprocity! Months of sacrifice followed, but they were not a burden for me. And when my mother-in-law serenely left for heaven, all of us felt a great sense of peace.

“A few days later I realized I was expecting the baby we had so greatly desired for over nine years! This child is a tangible sign of God’s overwhelming love.”

1 Lk 6:38.