

THE BACK OF THE BULLETIN

Blessed Are You!

Why do prophets of doom always sound as if their disturbing predictions might come true? Why are we so ready to believe that we've got it all wrong, and that we have been barking up the wrong tree for a long time? Why do people get into the media for discovering that boiling eggs or dressing in cotton or taking the dog for a walk or drinking cold water is (a) causing the polar ice cap to melt (b) giving us all cancer or (c) rotting little children's brains? I'm not sure. But I too have the disturbing sense that we are not on a proper course in the world as a whole. It doesn't take a Crystal Ball to discern that we can't go on indefinitely as we are. The signs are clear that we're destroying our environment with no clear idea of how to stop, that we're not improving as moral or spiritual people, and that the world is for too many of its inhabitants unfair, unpleasant, and unacceptable. There are too many wars, there is too much waste at the same time as too much poverty, there is simply too much untreated pain.

The Humble Of The Earth

The unfairness of the world owes much to the behaviour of strong, rich, powerful people like us. If we're thoughtful, we know that this usurped security of ours can't last for ever. Creation has a habit of self-correction, and we are uncomfortably aware of it. That's why we aren't consistent in our selfishness. We seek consolation in a little bit of correction, a slight trimming of the sails, a nod in the direction of compassion. We'll respond to the cry of humble people, if they cry humbly and keep their place. All those people whose houses were swept away in the tsunami, for instance: they lost everything because they had so little to lose. They are therefore the Deserving Poor. Scripture says we should be careful how we respond to them: God calls them his own; we and they are under his eye in a special way, and our treatment of them is a critical element in our eternal judgment. We compliment ourselves on the amount we contribute to their relief: but it isn't very much compared to what we spent on surplus fun and games for ourselves at Christmas. We sent them millions of pounds: hurrah! But we spent *billions* on food we never ate and presents we didn't need for ourselves. We feel guilt for wasting; a little charity and a little slimming in the new year will make us

feel clean again. But we will still spend more to make ourselves feel rich, than we will to rescue homeless, waterless, sick, penniless people who've lost all their earthly goods. We secretly know it's *necessary* for them to be poor, if we're going to stay rich. That's the way of the world, and it is why the world is already condemned.

Blessed Are The Poor

So in what does the "blessedness" of the poor consist? It didn't save those little ones from the tsunami, that they lived in flimsy houses on the shores where the rich go to enjoy luxurious holidays. Their tearful stories of their former happiness, the simplicity of their lives, make sad reading now. "I trusted the sea. It was part of my livelihood. But now I am afraid of it" - a strange echo of the Advent words of Jesus, as he spoke of *men bewildered by the roaring of the ocean and its waves, dying of fear as they await what menaces the world*. Can we make an honest response to these voices of grief and sorrow, from our secure place, far from their desolation? I wonder. It sometimes seems this machine of "civilisation" in which we live has taken us over, and we no longer have the vision to see how we've become its slaves.

Use The Beatitudes

In the Beatitudes today, Jesus doesn't offer the poor a way out of their poverty. He just tells them the Kingdom of Heaven is theirs. This hopeful message reminds us of the last Gospel of 2004, where Jesus promised the criminal who died with him that they would be *together in Paradise*. Is this the famous "pie in the sky when you die" that the Church used to be accused of preaching? No. It is the verdict of the Judge of the world. The poor of this world are blessed because they are dear to the Lord of the future world. Read through the Gospel again today. See if you qualify for the good news it carries. Do you suffer any genuine poverty under present conditions? Do you treat others with real gentleness? Do you mourn for the world's cruelty and injustice, hungering and thirsting for it to change? Do you seek the truth with a pure heart? Do you create peace by building justice and showing mercy? How much are you prepared to suffer for the birth of God's future kingdom on earth? Is today's Gospel good news for you?

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