

January 29, 2017 Anawim Homily: Brothers and sisters, Years ago the legendary Hall of Fame Basketball player, Bill Russell, made an appearance on an afternoon talk show hosted by the entertainer Merv Griffin. An African-American, Mr. Russell played for the Boston Celtics and won many championships as the team's Center. Although not a Roman Catholic, he was educated by Jesuits at the University of San Francisco, a Jesuit institution. In the course of their lively conversation Mr. Griffin asked his guest if his impoverished childhood was painful for him and his family. Mr. Russell protested. "But we were not poor", he exclaimed. "In the things that truly matter in life, we were truly blessed: devoted parents, a network of friends, a supportive community, and, most significant of all, our strong Christian faith". One cannot measure blessedness in terms of one's material comforts or achievements.

In the fifth chapter of Matthew's gospel, we hear the Lord's Sermon on the Mount. By sitting, Jesus assumes the posture of a Rabbi and begins to teach the multitudes. Matthew depicts Christ as the "New Moses" who teaches on a mountain, the frequent site of God's revelation to the Chosen People. (Recall Moses on Mt. Sinai, where he received the Divine law). Many of those who gather to hear Christ speak are the so-called "*anawim*", a Hebrew word meaning people who are bowed down, crushed, humiliated and defenseless. They are at the bottom rung of the social order. Their sole recourse is to place their trust in God alone. How blessed are they who know they need God. In the Old Testament, the psalmist writes, "He is blessed who seeks refuge in Him". The "*anawim*" know that they are protected by the Lord! They seek justice in Him, and Him alone! In his book Jesus of Nazareth, Pope Benedict writes of the "*anawim*", "They do not stride into God's presence as if they were partners able to engage with him on an equal footing; they do not claim to a reward for what they have done. They are people who know their poverty has an interior dimension. The saying of St. Therese of Lisieux about one day standing before God with empty hands, and holding them open to him; not with hands that grab and clutch, but hands that open and give and thus are ready to receive from God's abundant goodness."

In the seminary, where I studied for ordination to the priesthood, the members of my class were called the "*anawim*". Each of us had a t-shirt with the word "*anawim*" emblazoned on the front of the shirt. I have to wonder if the rector of the seminary was pleased. After all, it is unlikely that he desired to be the superior of a group of young students who were "bowed down and crushed"!

What further lessons can we derive from today's gospel? First, the eight Beatitudes ("Blessed are") are a self-portrait of Jesus himself. He is the one who is genuinely poor, meek, merciful, pure of heart and persecuted for the sake of righteousness. He is "a man of the beatitudes"! Our challenge is to embrace our Lord's teaching and live them in our Christian life. Second, it is abundantly clear that the values of Our Lord are so different from those of the world. In the Beatitudes, Jesus turns upside down many of the values by which people of every age live, even those of us who live in the world today. Take a moment to reflect on what the advertising and entertainment industries propose for a life that truly makes one happy and joyful. What a stark contrast to what our Lord teaches in his Sermon on the Mount.

The Sermon on the Mount is considered by scholars to be the charter of the Kingdom of Heaven. As disciples of Jesus, we are called to be a people of the Beatitudes. By living the Beatitudes, we draw others to Christ, who set a wonderful example for us by allowing his word to take flesh in his earthly life. Let us all be faithful witnesses!

Amen!