

4th Sunday in Ordinary Time 2011

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COME, LET'S MAGNIFY THE LORD! FOR HE IS WORTHY TO BE PRAISED. HOSANNA, BLESSED BE THE ROCK! BLESSED BE THE ROCK OF MY SALVATION! HOSANNA! JESUS IS THE ROCK! JESUS IS THE ROCK OF MY SALVATION! (SUNG)

You can probably tell that I've just come back from Jamaica on our parish trip visiting our sister parish, St Anne's in Kingston. After the reading of the Gospel there is always a time for choruses where the people stand and sing and dance their faith and trust in God. This is the fourth year that we have gone to Jamaica as a parish and it was again a rich spiritual experience in the midst of incredible poverty. The poverty we see as we walk the streets of west Kingston and are welcomed into the shacks in which people exist (live is too positive a word) is almost unimaginable to us here in Chestnut Hill. The poverty, stemming from economic injustice, class distinctions and multiple other factors, is experienced not only in the primitive housing in which people live but in the lack of nutrition for the children and the inadequacy of health and education. This is a people who have almost nothing in material terms. They are really poor. Their poverty is rooted in a history of slavery and colonialism in the past and their inability to be significant players in today's global economy. Even where tourism is successful in other parts of the island, the many people who live in the shacks and slums of West Kingston are not beneficiaries of the profits of the few entrepreneurs who have made their millions in the tourist or drug trade.

But if the people of St Anne's church and the children who attend St Anne's primary school are economically poor, having so little of the basics of life—healthcare, food, shelter, education—they are rich in other ways. This is the great paradox that all of us who go to Jamaica confront. How is it that this people who are so poor in material things can be so rich spiritually? Ask anyone who is at St Anne's Church on a Sunday morning, or at St Anne's school during the week what they have seen and they will tell you that the human spirit of these people and their faith in God puts those of us who have so much to shame. They are like those people in St. Paul's letter who count for nothing but put the rich and powerful to shame. Celebrate Eucharist with the parishioners of St Anne's who openly testify to the difference God

makes for them and you will be embarrassed by our own cultural reticence to speak of the wonders that God does for us.

For those of us who have the privilege of going to St. Anne's for a week, we have the grace of seeing the Beatitudes that we have just heard come alive. They are not just abstractions. They are not just nice words. They are in the lives of real people who live the injustices but want something better for themselves and their children. We have seen at once the hardships of living in poverty and the grace that God gives people to rejoice in the blessings they have, as insignificant as those blessings may be in the eyes of those who are wealthy and privileged.

We have seen the poor who are rich in spirit, who despite living with so little, exposed to the threat of violence on a daily basis, who count for nothing in the eyes of the world, yet are of inestimable value in God's eyes.

We have seen those who mourn: The principal of the elementary school told me of the many children who lost parents or relatives in the "incursion" last summer, when the government sent in the army to capture a drug lord whom the US wanted to deport and many innocent people were killed. One young boy whom I have known for five years witnessed his mother shot and left to die in the streets.

We have seen the meek, especially the elderly women of St Anne's who have borne so much suffering and loss in their lives. They are all strong women who are not afraid to speak their mind but whose trust in God is so palpable that they have borne their sufferings with patience.

We have seen those who hunger and thirst for righteousness: Fr. Peter McIsaac and the other Jesuits who are always advocating for the needs of these people, who are not afraid to confront the powerful and demand that the needs of these people be met, especially justice for those who are count as nothing.

We have seen the merciful in the ministry of the two sisters who work in the parish offering health care, food, responding to whatever needs to be done. Sr. Beverly and Sr. Telasia are two women whose commitment to compassion for the people of St. Anne's knows no limits.

We have seen the clean of heart: There is one woman whose name is Claire who lost her leg in an accident but who did not lose her spirit. She asked God to help her to find a way not to be buried in despair and God heard her prayer. She dances. When she is not in her wheel chair she dances standing on one leg. She jumps and hops and spins, her spirit so alive despite her loss. And there are the children with an innocence that is an open spirit that can only last so long in an environment that deprives them of the basics of life. We have seen the peacemakers: the teachers who dedicate themselves to teach in primitive conditions that these children might have some future.

When we come back from Jamaica and our visit we are transformed a little bit more by the encounter with a people who are poor in material things but rich in spirit. And that is what is most important for all of us who hear this gospel. Jesus' vision is one of transformation. Even if we ourselves do not live in poverty, will we find ways in which we can be radically dependent upon God and not be afraid to acknowledge that all that we have belongs to God. And will we find ways to alleviate the human suffering that those who live in poverty face. There is something about the experience of faith in St. Anne's Parish which truly does magnify the Lord, which enables us to see God's work in a powerful way and opens us up to the kingdom of God, where the poor are very rich in spirit.