

Reflection on the Beatitudes – January 30, 2011

Scripture: Matthew 5: 1-12

I had to memorize the Beatitudes when I was a child in Sunday School. I had no idea what they meant, and so they were very difficult to memorize. I'll bet that a lot of us who memorized the Beatitudes still have not much idea what they mean!

The Beatitudes are the first part of Jesus' teachings known as "the Sermon on the Mount" (Chapter 5 through 7:28), and are often considered the distillation of his teachings. Many books have been written on "The Sermon on the Mount". Along with the Lord's Prayer and the Ten Commandments, the Beatitudes are foundational work for the aspiring Christian.

These are highly concentrated and very concise teachings of Jesus. I'm going to take each one individually and try to expand enough on that one to enlarge a bit, hopefully, on our understanding of it. But this is a work we could each profit from spending some time with – contemplating the meaning of each one, and applying the action required of a disciple to every corner of one's life. When we do that, we will be changed – spiritual transformation will take place – and we will be a new person in Christ. Without application, no significant progress can be made.

And seeing the multitudes, he went up into a mountain: and when he was set, his disciples came unto him. When the rabbi or teacher sat down, it was traditional and respectful for his students to gather round him to hear what he had to say.

And he opened his mouth, and taught them saying,

Blessed are the poor in spirit: for theirs is the kingdom of heaven.

This is a great reversal. The poor in anything aren't usually rewarded with anything, are they? Poor in spirit conjures images of defeat, subjugation, poverty and meanness. But Jesus taught in general principles, and he was concerned with the spiritual life, so what would he have meant by this? To be "poor in spirit" really means to have emptied yourself of all desire to run your own life, and to have let go of any pre-conceived ideas or opinions in your personal search for God.

We might remember the story of the Rich Young Man who thought he had done everything right, until Jesus asked him to give away all his wealth and come and follow him. The rich man turned away from Jesus with tears in his eyes because he had great wealth – he was chained to his material possessions. Other things might hold us captive and exiled from God: status in the community, worldly honour and distinction, confidence in our own ideas, loyalty to human institutions and organizations. The Rich Young Man missed his opportunity for salvation – his chance to find God – because he had great possessions. Because his trust was in his riches, he could not enter into the kingdom of God.

The poor in spirit are blessed because they are free of all the burdens of attachment mentioned above, and are no longer so sure of their own ability to save themselves. They are ready to start again at the beginning and learn to live life as citizens of the kingdom of God.

Blessed are they that mourn: for they shall be comforted.

Though pain and suffering are not inherently good things, they often bring us to our knees and to a place where we are willing to learn

the Truth about God. Great sorrow is often the starting place in our search for God. Great sorrow is also often the appropriate response to the results of our sinful behavior, our disobedience to God both individually and collectively. Grief is often accompanied by insight – a clearer seeing of the consequences of our actions. Mourning is also the appropriate response to every significant loss in our lives.

Tom Long tells of a television commercial that shows windblown litter and cast-off garbage alongside a highway. Then the camera pans to the face of a Native American. “As he looks solemnly upon the spoiled landscape, a tear falls from his eye, his grief marking the distance between the world as it is and the world as it should be.” (Long 48-49). Our mourning in such cases is akin to Jesus weeping at the future destruction of Jerusalem. We cannot see the future, but there is plenty to weep about on the evening news.

There will be comforting, when we come to know the Truth that we live in God’s world, and God is not absent from it.

Blessed are the meek: for they shall inherit the earth.

Another great reversal here! The meek don’t win anything, do they? The prize goes to the smartest, the strongest, the fastest, doesn’t it? Looking around us this is surely true – on this level. But earth, in this instance, means all your outer experience – everything you see, hear, feel, taste and smell – all the world around you that you can perceive with your senses. It’s also everything you have created for yourself: your house, your college degree, your family, your community. On a darker note, it also means your poverty, your prison term, your false teeth, your drug addiction. To inherit the earth means to have power over all that – to be in control of your outer experience –

not to be a victim, but to be able to bring your life into harmony and the abundance that God has promised.

But how do we do that by being meek? In Psalm 37 (which Jesus alludes to in this beatitude) the psalmist calls the people to “Trust in the Lord, and do good, so you will live in the land and enjoy security”. He promises, “Yet a little while, and the wicked will be no more.. But the meek shall inherit the land, and delight themselves in abundant prosperity”.

The Hebrew word for meek in Psalm 37 is *anawim* and the person in the Bible who is described as being the most *anawim* person on the face of the earth (Numbers 12:3) is Moses. Over and over again Moses protests to God his unworthiness before God. But though he is humble before God, his actions in the world are not timid. He is decisive and demanding before Pharoah – and even before God, he argues persuasively that God should spare the people even though they have strayed far from God in making the golden calf idol.

Jesus also is described as meek. Both Jesus and Moses are perhaps better described as **not** self-seeking, **not** personally ambitious. Both Jesus and Moses are not weak – they are quietly powerful and decisive. **Both of them knew themselves to be working, not by human strength, but by the power of God. *Anawim*.** God’s blessing is assured.

Blessed are those who hunger and thirst for righteousness, for they will be filled.

Most of us don’t know much about being hungry or thirsty – we are affluent by any worldly standards. Clean water runs from our taps,

our refrigerators are full of good food. We have money to buy food and the stores here are full of it! No problem!

In Jesus's time and under the oppression of Rome, many Israelites would have had first hand experience of both hunger and thirst. To hunger or thirst is to suffer bodily pain, and to want with a terrible intensity to satisfy that hunger and that thirst. Starving people dream about food, think about food all the time, will kill for food or water to sustain life.

So to hunger and thirst after what is right and what is just is a very strong commitment – a very strong **personal** commitment. To be totally focused on what is righteous, on what is holy, on what is life sustaining and life giving is to be blessed – is to be filled. Blessed are those who ache to live in right relationship, who long for the kingdom of God to come on earth as it is in heaven. They will be filled, Jesus promises. Their dreams **will** come true. So dream big, children of God – and your dreams will be realized! What we think about, dream about, is more important than we know. It is spiritual Truth that what we think about in our minds is what we will produce in our lives. Therefore guard your thoughts, put them to work for God, for righteousness, and you will be blessed!

These are the first four of the Beatitudes of Jesus the Christ. They describe the heart of the person who is in right relationship with God. Those who are poor in spirit, those who mourn, those who are meek and those who hunger and thirst for righteousness – these people are rightly related to God.

Next Sunday we will talk about how a person in right relationship to God relates to other people, as we explore the last four Beatitudes.