

THE BEATITUDES

LUKE 6: 11, 20-26

SUNDAY 11 FEBRUARY 2007

We are called to be truly human in the image of God. It depends on where you are on the social scale, where you are emotionally, how Jesus' words affect you. They are pretty challenging to those of us who are rich and full and laughing. But for those who are sad and hungry and poor, there is comfort here. For those who are parched perhaps there is water.

A friend of mine rang me from Melbourne this week. She was in quite a state – I think is having a real crisis of faith. Among other things she's trying to decide whether to sell her house in Sydney and buy in Melbourne. "But aren't we supposed to give up all we have, to the poor?" she asked.

I found myself steering a middle ground, trying to listen to her, to hear what was really going on behind her brave front, as well as reflecting on what the Beatitudes might be saying to her, to me, to us today.

The Beatitudes are part of Jesus' great sermon, Jesus' mission statement, recorded in both Mathew and Luke.

Jesus is in the middle of the crowds. People have been coming to him and trying to touch him to get some of his healing power. He'd been speaking, healing diseases and those with unclean spirits.

In Mathew's gospel Jesus now preaches on the mountain, hence the Sermon on the Mount, linking him to Moses giving the law on Mount Sinai. But here in Luke, Jesus has come to a level place, a plain if you like. He looks up and speaks to his disciples in the presence of the crowds. People from all over the known world.

These are the ethics for his followers to live by – with God's grace.

In human terms they seem to be all wrong, they go against all that society stands for – comfort, security, enough food to eat, ‘happiness’ as such. It would wreck the system if we suggested that the poor, the hungry, the weeping, the persecuted are blessed or happy!

These are revolutionary ideas, a complete reversal of the world’s values.

Yet Jesus opens his sermon with such words: Blessed are you who are poor for yours is the Kingdom of God; Blessed are you who are hungry now for you will be filled; Blessed are you who weep now, for you will be comforted; Blessed are you when people hate you and exclude and defame you for your reward is great in Heaven. (Then he adds four corresponding woes, Mathew’s gospel has nine blessings, no woes).

But what does it all mean to us? People have interpreted these Beatitudes on a number of levels.

According to St Luke, the blessings are for those who are poor, hungry, sad, oppressed, whom the world pushes aside with contempt or cruelty. These are the ones for whom God has compassion.

And Jesus certainly bore this out in his actions. He was criticised for associating with the rabble, the unemployed, prostitutes, tax cheats, and he was certainly not ‘religious’. He was accused of being a glutton and a drunkard in contrast to John the Baptist.

He challenged the upright middle class church goers (like many of us).

Jesus blessing the poor reverses the expected, shocking to those whose doctrine is one of prosperity, whose god is not revealed by Jesus of Nazareth. And this theme carries right through Luke.

Mary’s canticle earlier in Luke sets up the pattern of divine reversal – the rich are sent away empty and the powerful brought low while the poor are lifted up. God is upsetting the world’s measures – the ones who are outcast and excluded by the world and perhaps the church, are accepted by God.

The good news to them is that the standards of humans are not those of God, “Yours is the Kingdom of God” says Jesus.

In the parable of the great banquet further on in Luke, Jesus suggested that those preoccupied with possessions couldn’t respond to the kingdom invitation and were rejected, so the call went out to the poor, maimed, blind and lame.

And so surely, on one level, our response to Jesus’ sermon is to ask ‘Who are the poor in our midst, who are hungry, sad, oppressed?’

Now can we live in solidarity with the poor, the sad, the hungry? Solidarity means truthfully, recognising the place we stand in, while really seeing theirs; and then with love and honesty and commitment exploring the connections between us and working together for change? (Ed. Janet Morby, *Bread for Tomorrow*, Praying with the world’s poor).

Lilla Watson, indigenous Australians says:

If you have come to help me,
then you are wasting your time.
But if you have come because your liberty
is bound up with mine, then let
us work together.

We are called to be truly human in the image of God – shown to us in Jesus.

God is on the side of righting injustice. No doubt many of you have thought about this a lot and responded accordingly – and that is why social justice is on our priority list at Holy Covenant. Maybe some have thought, but have no clear directions? I think it’s an ongoing challenge and we as a community need to constantly reassess our actions. If we take them seriously Jesus’ words must influence our values, the way we work, our relationships – they are seditious and maybe that is our call too, social justice is integral to our being, vital if we are to respond to God’s love and not stay inward looking. We can however get so busy being active that we forget why we’re involved – there is a need for balance between reflection and action.

The Beatitudes can be interpreted on another level too, not conclusively in sociological terms; and I suppose Mathew's gospel (Chapter 5: 3-12) has more of this emphasis.

Mathew, more than Luke, stresses the spiritual and moral qualities of those who will enter the Kingdom of Heaven. He adds, "Blessed are the poor in spirit and blessed are those who hunger, thirst for righteousness".

For ultimately the question is of our relationship with God. It is when I am poor (in spirit), when I have my supports pulled out from under me that I turn to God – and find God waiting. It's when I am at my lowest that I cry for help and find God there.

I certainly need my supports and defences to protect me when I am vulnerable, but sometimes these get in the way of what is really important in life. My defences and supports become like a cocoon keeping me from myself and from God.

God doesn't take away the pain but seems to be there in the middle of it, confronting me saying that it is there in the pain, in my poverty, that I experience who I am – and it is there that I am told how blessed or privileged I am.

Jess seems to be saying the sad person is blessed when he stops smiling and cries – out of the tears will come something new.

The angry person is blessed when she experiences the anger and the hurt behind the anger. In the hurt she will begin to find comfort.

The person trapped in a relationship that has lost meaning where there is no bond or communication is privileged, blessed when he cries out his need and despair. When he finally admits to himself and faces what is really happening – only then do new energies, new possibilities open up.

Blessed are you poor for yours is the Kingdom of God,
 Blessed are you who weep now for you will laugh, after the tears, not the superficial laugh of the self-satisfied, but the deep groan of and warm smile in the eye of those who have faced the darkness and are coming out the other side, of those who delight in the opening of a

flower or the sun at dawn, or the progress of an ant across the path.(from Colin Alcock in Eremos newsletter)

In facing ourselves, we find out who we are – and find that God is there loving and accepting us.

Colin Alcock, the past Executive Director of Eremos offers a personal paraphrase of the Beatitudes, one that may give them a slightly different twist:

You are not pathetic or crazy but you are actually privileged when you are experiencing how very poor you are, for there you will find new depths of life.

Consider yourself as privileged when you begin to cry. Don't stop it before time for you shall be comforted.

Consider yourself as one who is privileged when you have been "caught out" and become vulnerable. Stay there for a while and you shall inherit the earth.

You are privileged when you have been reduced to the point where you have become quite desperate for integrity, when all you want is just to do the right thing, for you shall be satisfied.

You are privileged when all you have left to offer another person is mercy and forgiveness for you too shall receive mercy.

You are privileged when, through force of circumstances, all your unconscious and mixed motives have been stripped away, for you shall see God.

Consider yourself not as the loser but as privileged when you have finally reached the point with another where all you want is reconciliation, an end to separateness, for you will be a child of God.

And, finally, Jesus said something like, “*You are privileged when you so threaten others by such poverty that they mistreat you and lie about you.*” For that is what they did to him.

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