

EPIPHANY IV, YEAR A

29 January 2023

Matthew 5:1-12

Who do you look up to? Maybe you have role models or people whom you admire who come to mind right away, or perhaps you need a moment to think about this. It may not be immediately clear to us who it is that we give the power of influence to in our lives.

But we do give the power of influence, even when not aware of it. There is an entire economy built around this. Advertisers are increasingly using influencer marketing to sway what you buy. In 2020, *Business Insider* estimated that the influencer market was set to reach \$15 billion dollars by last year (2022). Why? Because it works. The Nielson Consumer Trust Index reports that 93% of people trust influencer marketing over traditional advertising.¹ Again, you may not even be aware of it, but we all share the experience of having been sold on the notation that we need something because we gave away the power to influence over ourselves.

Having role models isn't a bad thing, but there are pitfalls to our admiring the success of others. When we strive, unbridled, towards being like those who are successful in the ways that we desire to be successful; celebrities, the rich, or over our shoulder at the 'Jones'; our view of what is important in life becomes distorted. Furthermore, it causes us to commit our time, energy, and resources to chasing after things that we think make us feel good, or valuable, but actually leave us hollow. We live in a world where we give value and are given value as individuals by metrics such as how much we are worth or how much we produce. We congratulate people on being self-sufficient, 'productive members of society', rather than admiring those who need the help of others; we advise 'stiff upper lip', rather than showing emotion, or even mourning, for fear that it makes us seem weak; and we prize strength or 'winners', rather than those who are persecuted. We pity the persecuted and would not actively seek to find ourselves among them. That would be foolish.

What is wise versus what is foolish is recalibrated in the Gospel, by the inversion of all the qualities that I've just described. An inversion of the ways of the world is a theme that echoes throughout the Scriptures (cf. The Song of Moses and Miriam in Exodus 15; Hannah's Prayer in 1 Samuel 2), and is fully realized in the person of Jesus Christ, whose power is known in his giving himself over to death. This inversion is precisely what Mary sings of in response to learning that she will bear the Messiah:

And Mary said,
 "My soul magnifies the Lord,
⁴⁷ and my spirit rejoices in God my Savior,
⁴⁸ for he has looked with favor on the lowly state of his servant.

¹ Fertick, Michael. "Why Is Influencer Marketing Such A Big Deal Right Now?" *Forbes*. 2 July 2020. <
<https://www.forbes.com/sites/michaelfertik/2020/07/02/why-is-influencer-marketing-such-a-big-deal-right-now/?sh=7bb4d8f975f3>>

Surely from now on all generations will call me blessed,
⁴⁹ for the Mighty One has done great things for me,
 and holy is his name;
⁵⁰ indeed, his mercy is for those who fear him
 from generation to generation.
⁵¹ He has shown strength with his arm;
 he has scattered the proud in the imagination of their hearts.
⁵² He has brought down the powerful from their thrones
 and lifted up the lowly;
⁵³ he has filled the hungry with good things
 and sent the rich away empty.
⁵⁴ He has come to the aid of his child Israel,
 in remembrance of his mercy,
⁵⁵ according to the promise he made to our ancestors,
 to Abraham and to his descendants forever.”

(Luke 1:46-55 NRSV)

In Christ, God makes the wisdom of this world foolish, and the foolishness of the cross becomes wise.

I ask again, who do you look up to? Is it Christ's wisdom that you seek? This morning Matthew gathers us, with crowds and the disciples, to Jesus sitting on a mountain. The invitation to each of you today is to look up to him.

Here, at the beginning of the Sermon on the Mount, our Lord lays out the values that should order our lives, almost all of which seem foolish by conventional wisdom:

Blessed are the poor in spirit, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven.
 Blessed are those who mourn, for they will be comforted.
 Blessed are the meek, for they will inherit the earth.
 Blessed are those who hunger and thirst for righteousness, for they will be filled.
 Blessed are the merciful, for they will receive mercy.
 Blessed are the pure in heart, for they will see God.
 Blessed are the peacemakers, for they will be called children of God.
 Blessed are those who are persecuted for righteousness' sake, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven.
 Blessed are you when people revile you and persecute you and utter all kinds of evil against you falsely on my account. Rejoice and be glad, for your reward is great in heaven, for in the same way they persecuted the prophets who were before you.

For those of us who call ourselves Christians: these are our values. The Beatitudes are to be the laws that govern our lives.

We know this, not only because Jesus invites us to live in this way, but because these precepts are consistent with the Law given to Moses in Exodus. Like Jesus ascends a mountain to give

this teaching, Moses goes up Mount Sinai to receive God's Law; the Ten Commandments, to deliver to God's people. The parallel is no coincidence. What are we to read in it? That blessedness, that is God-given joy, is found in living lives oriented towards loving God and neighbour.

As I mentioned last week, only the love of God can fulfill our deepest longings. If we chase after the things that the wisdom of this world points us toward, we will not find peace. Our wholeness comes from God alone, as we are rooted in his love.

And when we are rooted in his love, we are enabled to love our neighbours in way that is defined by God's wisdom; by God's love. When Jesus sits down to teach, Matthew says that after he sat down, the disciples came to him. This is no insignificant detail; the message of the marks of God's Kingdom come goes through the disciples towards the crowds that gather. In the same way, for those of us who seek to be disciples of Jesus, we carry with us in the shape of our lives, in His values that we share, a foretaste of his Kingdom to those who seek it. Our poverty, meekness, persecution, and so on our not futile acts of self-deprecation; they are opportunities for the love of Jesus Christ to be known to those who long to experience wholeness themselves.

The charge this morning is simple: up to Jesus. Follow his teachings. Value the way of the cross, though it is foolishness to the world. God will not put you to shame, but will make you whole; for his Kingdom and Glory.

Amen.