

January 29, 2023

Year A: Epiphany IV (Matthew 5:1-12)

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Did you find the gospel reading today familiar and comfortable? As soon as we hear the first few words, we settle back into a nice, soft cushion of “Oh yes, I know this one. The Beatitudes.” And then we stop listening because we know how it goes. It’s like singing a favourite old hymn; we just let it flow over us.

We are usually offered The Beatitudes as a prescription for how we ought to be. The message we usually hear is “be like this if you want to be among the blessed. Follow these rules and you too will be perfect and get into heaven.” But just like some of those favourite old hymns, it’s best not to look too closely at the words because the closer you look at this familiar passage, the more puzzling it is.

- **Blessed are the poor in spirit.** That doesn’t exactly sound like a good thing to be. Surely we should be strong in spirit, shouldn’t we? Or does it mean that you may be rich but in your heart you feel poor? Or feel **for** the poor?
- **Blessed are they that mourn.** Mourning is not usually optional. Most of us, over our lifetimes, spend more time mourning than we would like. Mourning is inevitable; it’s not something we go looking for. That said, I have met some people – and I’m sure you have – who believe that you can only be a Christian if you are suffering. There really are people who set out deliberately to be tragic, to be mourners; they will even wallow in other people’s sorrows, as if this will impress God.
- **Blessed are the meek.** Well, nowadays, “meek” is not a compliment. Perhaps it once was. “Gentle Jesus, meek and mild” was, I’m sure, originally intended as a compliment. But in our day, “meek” implies spineless, helpless, wimpish. Deserving of sympathy, perhaps, but not imitation.

And so it goes on. As a prescription for personality revision, this passage doesn’t work very well in our times. There are too many words and ideas here that just don’t make much sense in 2023.

The fogs of time, language and cultural difference have made it very hard to understand, and that’s hardly surprising. Have you ever tried to explain to anyone under 20 what your favourite songs from 40 or 50 years ago were talking about?

Multiply that problem by ten times as many years, as well as translation from one language to another, and then another, and it’s not surprising that it’s hard to interpret scripture. Of course, we can dig into all sorts of commentaries and opinions. Scholars have been arguing over every detail of scripture for ever. (*It is, after all, how they make a living!*)

The first squabble is about calling these verses The Beatitudes. The Latin word “beata” means “blessed” in the sense of “*holy*”, but the gospels weren’t originally in Latin, and there’s dispute over the translation. The Greek was “μακαριος” which means “blessed” in the sense of “*happy*.” Some scholars call this text the

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Makarisms. Unfortunately, that has never caught on, probably because it sounds too much like coconut cookies.

The next squabble is over what “poor” means. Purists who take it as the opposite of “wealthy”, interpret this passage as meaning that only the poor are children of God. Some suggest that “in spirit” was added later, so that the rich wouldn’t feel left out. The reasoning is that only those who live in poverty are children of God, but if you aren’t actually poor, then having sympathy for the poor might be good enough.

The opposition argues that the Greek word “πτωχος” means **really** poor, as in completely destitute and dependent on the charity of others to live. With a few theological contortions, “poor in spirit” could mean recognizing that we are totally dependent on the Holy Spirit and need to beg for the gifts of the Spirit to survive.

Now, after a few hours of reading this sort of stuff, your head starts to ache and you begin to look forward to getting a tooth pulled. It’s fascinating, but torturing the individual words doesn’t help much in making sense of the narrative. Looking at it as whole, and trying to imagine the scene is sometimes more helpful.

So what was happening here? Jesus had been travelling around the countryside for a while. His days had been full of lepers, the blind, the paralysed, the dying, the grieving, the starving. Crowds formed everywhere he went, desperate to hear words of encouragement and hope. Looking at them, he could see their desperation.

And perhaps what he wanted to tell them was that they didn’t need to go searching for God because God was already with them. Those who were feeling lost and desperate needed to know that God doesn’t disappear when the going gets rough. Those who were struggling with illness and tragedy needed to know that these things weren’t punishments from God. Those who were distraught about the awful things happening around them needed to know that bad times are not a sign that God has gone away.

The people on that hillside were just like us. Their clothes were different; their language was different; their understanding of the world was different, but, just like all people, their lives were touched by sorrow, by illness and by loss. Some were emotionally distraught; some were angry and confused by the evil around them. Their circumstances were worse than ours, for sure, but every life has its sorrows.

The reassurance that Jesus gave them was that, for all of those conditions and phases of life that seem so hard to get through, there is a state of grace. And these are the very times when we most need God, and when God most wants to be with us.

- Especially when we feel the spirit is weak within us and we have lost our way, the kingdom of heaven

is still within our reach.

- Especially when we mourn, there is comfort to be found.
- Especially when we feel powerless and broken, we are held up.
- Especially when injustice and wickedness seem to have the upper hand, we need to know it will not always be so.
- Especially when we feel that our struggle to be faithful in the world is pointless, God re-assures us that our efforts are never wasted.

In all the worst times of life there is a state of grace that surrounds us and carries us through. The tragedy of humanity is that we too often cut ourselves off from it.

C. S. Lewis talked about feeling cut off from God during the worst days of his life after his wife died. He felt that there was an enormous door between him and God, and that he was pounding on the door trying to get through. But at the same time he knew that God was on the other side of the door trying desperately to get through to him. Eventually he realized that he had slammed the door himself.

His constant prayer, an anguished “Why?”, had no answer. Once he realized that we can never understand the answer to that question, he realized that the darkness was temporary, and could feel beside him the warm presence of the one who would walk with him and guide him out of the dark. When he stopped asking the question that has no answer, he found his way to the prayer that does: “Help me.” God was trying to reach him, and all he had to do was to lower the barrier.

Perhaps that was what Jesus wanted to tell all of those needy people on the hillside: tragedies and sorrows shouldn't cut us off from God; they should bring us closer.

Amen.