

Sermon, January 29, 2023

Matthew 5:1-12

“Blessed are the Poor in Spirit”

This morning’s reading brings us to the Sermon on the Mount, which is at the very heart of Jesus’ teaching - and it begins with the verses known as the Beatitudes. The word beatitude comes from the Latin and means blessedness. Such sayings are not exclusive to Jesus’ teaching. Beatitudes can be found in the Old Testament, as well as in Classical Greek literature. But there is a difference. Most are based on a certain condition, as in, you will be blessed if you do this or that. But Jesus’ beatitudes seem to be about conditions that already exist, i.e., you are blessed because you are poor in spirit, or you are meek, or mourning , etc.

You will also find that various versions of the Bible translate differently. Instead of Blessed are, some say, happy are, or fortunate are, but each suggest there is something good about how you are.

The first of the beatitudes reads, “Blessed are the poor in spirit, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven”. Again, the word ‘theirs’ suggests that they are already blessed simply because they are poor in spirit.

This opening beatitude stands in contrast to the first beatitude In Luke’s version, which simply says, “Blessed are you who are poor, for yours is the kingdom of God.” In other words, blessed are you who live in poverty. But how is that a blessing? Well, it has something to do with Jesus’ earlier statement when he quotes Isaiah, saying, “because he has anointed me to bring good news to the poor”. Perhaps we can see that Good news as a sense of hope.

But Matthew adds the words “in spirit”. This changes the meaning. Rather than material poverty, it speaks of a sense of spiritual poverty. This can be construed as meaning they are living in a state of spiritual darkness. But Matthew is pointing us in a different direction, where “in spirit” transforms an economic and social condition into a readiness to accept the word of God”. (Gutierrez). What this says to me is that when you find yourself in a state of emotional or spiritual darkness you yearn to find some light and are thus more open to the infilling of God’s Spirit. This is where the blessedness comes in., because the kingdom of heaven signifies the word or will of God breaking into the dark places of human existence. In our darkness comes a new light.

So, this opening beatitude sets the stage for those that follow, because there is an openness to the reception of God's Spirit. This is apparent in the second beatitude that says, "Blessed are those who mourn, for they will be comforted". This idea is actually drawn from Old Testament writings which speak of God as a comforter. For example, Isaiah 49:13, "Sing for joy, O heavens, and exalt, O earth, break forth, O mountains into singing! For the Lord has comforted his people and will have compassion on his suffering ones". God is aware of our suffering - in this case, suffering from broken-heartedness. Jesus also affirms this in the ninth chapter of Matthew when he asks, "The wedding guests cannot mourn as long as the bridegroom is with them, can they?" Of course, in this analogy, we are the wedding guests, and the bridegroom is Jesus who brings comfort. This does not mean that all grief comes to an end. Going through the grieving process is an important part of our healing, but it does mean that we are not alone in that grief - that God's Spirit will sustain us and carry us forward.

The next beatitude reads, "Blessed are the meek for they shall inherit the earth." This can be misunderstood because of the word 'meek', which we may understand as someone who is shy - a shrinking violet - or even a Casper Milquetoast. The more accurate translation is 'humble', i.e., blessed are those who are humble. This can have a couple of meanings. First, it is related to those who are poor - those who appear lowly, or insignificant, and powerless. But "It has nothing to do with weakness; but the strength these powerless ones have is derived from love rather than fear". (Schweitzer) Secondly, it suggests that in humility one's ego does not get in the way of God's Spirit, which not only comforts, but strengthens as well.

The next beatitude says, "Blessed are those who hunger and thirst for righteousness, for they will be filled." These words had to be comforting for the poor who first heard these words, because in the biblical context, the word 'righteousness' is synonymous with the word 'justice'. Those who heard Jesus speak those words were most definitely living in an unjust system. For us, there is no lack of injustice in the world. We can take from that some form of hope. However, as can be seen in the much of the rest of the Sermon on the Mount, such justice does not just magically appear - it requires action on our part strengthened through the infilling of the Spirit of God. We will see that in next week's reading when Jesus speaks of us as salt and light. Amen.

Let us pray: Gracious Lord, ever loving and ever kind, we praise your holy name, and thank you for this day you have given us. We are truly blessed by the presence of your Spirit here in our lives, and we continue to seek the strength, the courage, the love, and the faith we need to face and overcome the challenges of our day. We are grateful that in your Son Jesus we can find light in times of darkness, comfort in times of mourning, strength in our apparent weakness, and hope in the face of injustice. We know that such injustice grieves your divine heart, and that when we are open to you we can find the means to overcome. May your Holy Spirit open our eyes to new possibilities awakened through a knowledge of your will.

For those who are in special need of your comforting and healing presence we pray, remembering to you... Amen.