

Fourth Sunday after Epiphany

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Introduction

The Beatitudes begin Jesus' Sermon on the Mount, a discourse running from the beginning of chapter 4 in *Matthew* all the way to the end of chapter 7. With these opening lines, Jesus declares a state of blessing upon those many would assign to despair: blessed are those poor in spirit; blessed are those who mourn; blessed are the meek. There is an ease and a melody in Jesus' phrases. He is strangely comfortable in declaring true what many would hear as tone-deaf pipe dreams.

The Beatitudes therefore confront us with questions of what sort of reality we have grown far too comfortable with, and what sort of world we dare to declare is not just possible – but real and available.

Text

When Jesus saw the crowds, he went up the mountain; and after he sat down, his disciples came to him. Then he began to speak, and taught them, saying:

“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 be shown 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.”

Comment

The Beatitudes lend themselves to a discussion about a whole range of particular conflicts in unjust societies and within broken relationships. Who are the ‘poor in spirit’ (and what about the plain old poor)? What does ‘meek’ mean in relationship to power? How long will the hungry and thirsty have to wait? There are so many trees of interest in this passage that we can quickly lose sight of the forest. Perhaps it is best to call ourselves back to attention with the same word Jesus used to silence the crowd: ‘Blessed.’

‘Blessed?’ Blessed are those who mourn? Blessed are those who hunger? Blessed are those who are persecuted? *Blessed?* Not in my experience.’ This single word invites us to compare the realities of the human condition with the truth of God’s kingdom. We find ourselves wondering whether Jesus sees something we don’t, whether the discrepancy between what is and what should be is what Jesus wants to highlight, or whether this preacher is somehow blind to experiences that fail to bring prosperity. Regardless, this initial word thrusts Jesus into his public ministry and us into a struggle about just how blessed we think people can be in this real world of ours.

If we find Jesus’ words platitudinous, we may fear that they will provide cold comfort to those undergoing genuine strife. The challenge then becomes balancing our recognition of the hardships of this world with Jesus’ insistence on the availability of a better one. On the other hand, if we are too quick to find comfort in Jesus’ soothing words – phrases so often stitched into decorative pillows – we could stand to hear again their disruptive message: God is breaking into the world to side with those who suffer, who persevere, who strive to overturn the status quo.

Jesus calls us to ‘rejoice and be glad’ not because things are how they should be, but because a much different reality is already at hand.

Response

The Beatitudes lead us to reconsider where blessedness might lie: not in the obvious places of prosperity and unencumbered ease, but in the lives of those who struggle for what is right against the norm.

Who in our communities might have an experience of blessing that in this world rings both discordant and true? Can we imagine additional Beatitudes that acknowledge the injustice, brokenness or hardship of specific circumstances while proclaiming God’s overriding truth?

Blessed are the queer...

Blessed are the single parents...

Blessed are those in the minority...

Blessed are those in conflict...

Blessed are the hopeless causes...

Blessed are the marginalised...

Blessed are those who reject labels (including 'blessed')...

Blessed are you when....well, when? When are you blessed by a reality you sometimes doubt is true?

Rejoice and be glad in a message that is at odds with what the world would have us believe.

Prayer

Blessed Jesus,
up on a mountain you sat down and gathered a crowd with one word.
In naming a surprising list of those who receive God's blessing,
you remind us of the realities of this world and the truth of your realm.
Help us to recognise that in striving for a better life for others,
we find ourselves among those you call blessed.
Amen.