

Fourth Sunday after the Epiphany

29.01.2017
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Introduction

The Sermon on the Mount is Jesus' painting of the kingdom of God. He has just called the disciples, been baptized by John the Baptist, and has begun proclaiming the good news of the kingdom. He is on the mountain with his disciples having escaped the crowds in Galilee and is preaching the unexpected.

The beatitudes are full of opposites; they are a proclamation of blessings on the things that are unanticipated. Why are we so challenged by the surprise of opposites? Jesus' words are a rejection of the systems of the world for the announcement of the kingdom. In the opposites of the beatitudes, we discover where we have failed to be proclaimers and builders of the world God so faithfully hopes us to co-create. Jesus is pointing out the necessity of our shift towards righteousness and justice, a new way of partnering in the world. The opposites may initially make us uncomfortable, but sit with the challenge and see where God is calling you to move.

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 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.

Comment

What does the kingdom look like? What does it mean to live *in* a kingdom? How does that shape our understanding of conflict? Jesus is offering a new way of being in the world, another way of engaging with the human systems that put power and our security in wealth, individualism, and moral codes that are not of God.

The even greater challenge in the beatitudes for us today is to not live in subjugation of these worldly ways. St Augustine refers to the Beatitudes as the, “perfect standard for the Christian life.” When we live in faithfulness to the life as expressed in the beatitudes, we say ‘yes’ to the invitation to participation in the kingdom of God. The beatitudes don’t ignore the possibility of conflict or suffering, for that is what is made known in the opposite nature of Jesus’ words. You most likely will be persecuted, people may speak false words against you, and they will insult you, but the challenge is in remembering who you are in God and the call of your life as a result. It is an active response that requires a shift, a passionate dance with the world that is often moving against us. In the dance with the sensitivity of human existence, tension and conflict are possible and a natural result of two worlds colliding. We dance against what the world is telling us is appropriate and right into the world of the kingdom. We raise our voices, because we know the good news of the kingdom is not a story of injustice, inequality, or ignorance.

The Community of Cross of Nails is an international network of partner churches and organizations who have been inspired by the Coventry Cathedral story and are doing peace and reconciliation work within their own context. Christ Church Cathedral in St. Louis, MO, USA is a thriving community committed to racial equity. They have been partners with the ‘Black Lives Matter Movement’ in St. Louis after the shooting and subsequent death of teenager Michael Brown by a Ferguson police officer. Their work for justice and reconciliation is exemplary of the picture that Jesus paints in our scripture text. Christ Church has become a place of hope, education, and partnership with minority voices. They have stood amongst the voiceless who were finding their voice in protests and nonviolent direct action and said, “Use me.” They thirst for righteousness for their friends of colour and seek to be radical peacemakers with a heart for justice. However, this story does not belong to Christ Church Cathedral in St. Louis alone but is a story of many communities seeking to be a living example of the kingdom that Jesus is preaching on the mountain. Does this include your community? If not, how might the beatitudes be speaking to the work you’re called to do? Do not try to make the opposites of the beatitudes more comfortable, but use them as a means of challenge and action.

Response

May these questions offer reflection and challenge to you or your community in seeking to live more faithfully into a call that will put you at odds with the world.

- What have been some moments of collision between you and the world?

-When have you been passionate about an issue of justice that has caused conflict in your community?

-What issues have caused a divide in your community?

-How did power or lack of power play a role in the shaping of the conversation?

-What personal reflection can be done from the opposites of the beatitudes for discernment of God's will? Where have you/your community not been pure at heart? Where have you forgotten to mourn or be peacemakers?

It may be of interest to your congregations to explore some contemporary British and Irish communities who are seeking to witness to the beatitudes today. The communities and organisations that have contributed to the Spirituality of Conflict resource are working together in friendship and witness in the hope that beatitude can be found, even in the conflicts of contemporary life.

The Corrymeela Community, The Iona Community, The Mission and Discipleship council for the Church of Scotland, the Coventry Reconciliation project, the Irish School of Ecumenics and Place for Hope may all be places of interest for your consideration of narratives of witness to the beatitudes.

However you may prefer to witness to events in your own congregation, in your own community, in your location or groups who are making a difference to the difficulties in your parish area. Wherever there is strife, there is usually a group who are proclaiming justice, beatitude, blessing and life. They are the echoes of the voice of Jesus standing on the hillside speaking words of joy to communities under oppression. He is pointing to a deeper story that will sustain them. And today's sermon may be a way to share this.

Prayer

Merciful teacher on the mountain,

You've offered us a challenge that is converse to the world we exist in.

You've boldly declared what it means to not be transformed by this world but to be renewed by the Spirit.

We confess that we have failed to live up to the call of—peacemaking, meekness, mercy, justice—and filled our lives with the ways of the world—selfishness, greed, degradation of your creation, injustice.

Open our hearts, O God, to understand your will.

May your passion on the mountain for a new world order illumine our work for the kin-dom that you proclaim.

We pray in the name of the One who first loved us and calls us to love,

Amen.