

2 February, 2014

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Mathew 5: 1-12

(an abridged version)

1. Today in Matthew's gospel we remember the Sermon on the Mount, the Beatitudes as they are also known. Luke has a different version as Luke is speaking to a different audience in a different context.

I remember what I thought was a very funny film made by the Monty Python group called "The Life of Brian". There was much controversy about this film at the time and was seen by many Christians to be poking fun at Jesus. However, I remember an interview with John Cleese and Michael Palin and they made the point that people don't always get it, they misunderstand the words of Jesus. This was highlighted by the Sermon on the Mount in the film. Jesus said "Blessed are the peacemakers". Someone at the back said. "What, Blessed are the Cheese makers. Why should they be blessed? A good illustration of their point. So today let's revisit the words of Jesus and hear what they might say to us in the 21st century.

2. **Jesus said Blessed are the poor in spirit.** This is different to Luke who said Blessed are the poor with his greater emphasis on poverty. Matthew has a different audience so he is concerned with their poverty of spirit. One label we might give this in this day and age is when is enough enough. I am one of the Baby Boomer generation but they have given a new label to those of us who were born between 1955 and 1965. We are called the Jones generation after the expression "keeping up with the Joneses". We have to have what everyone else has even if we don't need it. I must admit I love gadgets and what they can do. I realised one day that I don't really need to buy the latest gadget. It can be just as easy and less time consuming and more enjoyable to do it by hand. Corporations like to suck us in to buying a new gadget even though our old one is still okay and still does the job. As such I have bought the new iphone5S even though my old iphone 4 did everything I actually needed.

I regularly get emails asking me to subscribe to a stockbroker magazine "The Motley Fool". I was surprised to read in the latest email an article about this very concept. They illustrated it well with a story about two different people. One had worked hard doing 60-80 hours per week for ten years and as a result he had accumulated ten billion dollars. However, he wasn't satisfied so he keeps working

60-80 hours per week. The other story is of a couple who also worked hard. By the time they were thirty they had bought the house they wanted and paid it off. They had accumulated enough wealth to give them an income for the rest of their lives. This income at the present time is \$25,000 a year and they live quite comfortably off this income. They are satisfied. They have enough. As we reflect on this saying. How are our lives? Do we understand the concept of enough and what it might mean for us?

3. **Blessed are the peacemakers.** This is a real challenge in a world where violence seems to be the norm and we see it on the front page of our newspapers and on our televisions. However, despite the headlines the incidence of violence and war has actually dropped considerably around the world which is encouraging. What is the challenge for us as Christians in the 21st Century? We need to hear the message of Jesus and indeed in other religions that peace is paramount, that doing no harm to others is paramount, that we should only do to others what we ourselves would like done to us. These are not messages of violence. However, we have to acknowledge that the biblical writers have struggled over the years in regard to violence. We hear in our reading from Micah a very clear message against a particular form of violence when Micah the prophet states that God does not want sacrifice. We hear that God does not want violence in the form of the sacrifice of the first born. This has also been an interpretation of the story of Abraham being asked to sacrifice Isaac. An interpretation from a non-violent perspective is that God in this story is calling an end to human sacrifice. In the reading from Micah God is going further. He is now calling an end to sacrifice altogether instead preferring people to express their loyalty to God by how they live their lives.

In a book called "Binding the strongman" a political interpretation of Mark's Gospel by Ched Myers, Ched examines the gospel and hence the life of Jesus from a non-violent perspective. If God no longer wanted sacrifice why does the notion that God sent Jesus to die for us make sense. This is an interpretation of later writers such as Anselm in the 12th century trying to make sense of the death of Jesus in the light of the resurrection. In light of the writings of Myers and others it is quite reasonable to say that God did not send his son to die. A non-violent perspective says that Jesus was a troublemaker for the Pharisees and others in power and was subsequently put to death. This parallels the death of John the Baptist who was also put to death for questioning the morals of King Herod. We see in the life of Jesus that he resisted the idea of being a revolutionary, raising up an army and throwing out the Romans and their corrupt minions who did their

dirty work in Israel. Jesus resisted a violent reaction to his arrest in the garden of Gethsemane. He told Peter to put away his sword.

From the perspective of Ched Myers Jesus was gotten rid of by violent people. However, the story does not end there. Ched Myers sees the resurrection as non-violence having the last word; that love and peace will triumph over those who would wish to destroy through acts of violence. So the challenge is for us to use different language in our Christian journey promoting non-violence and peace as opposed to violence, revenge and hate.

4. **Blessed are those who hunger and thirst for righteousness.**

We live in interesting times. There is no longer clear lines about what it means to be Protestant or Catholic. There are now a number of Catholic politicians yet they talk very much about individualism rather than the common good. It seems to reflect the old Protestant work ethic. Work hard for six days and on the seventh go to church and you have reserved your place in heaven. This reflected a strong belief in individual piety. However, let us reconsider this in the light of what Jesus has said here. I believe that Jesus wants us to have more than a personal piety, I believe that Jesus challenges us to have an active faith. Jesus wants us to advocate for those who miss out, the marginalised, the dispossessed, refugees who are displaced. I was listening to Counterpoint with Amanda Vanstone the other day. She was interviewing someone about the market economy and the advances that has seen. The person being interviewed made it quite clear that our advances in lifting people out of poverty have been driven by innovation. This is a very important point as it means that if we are to have innovation then we must provide education, we must encourage an interest in science and we must encourage an interest in the development of imagination and we must work to ensure that all have the opportunity to take part in this. This has been clearly demonstrated in our history. In order to lift people out of poverty, education and innovation must be encouraged and the more people that have this opportunity the more likely it is for this to happen. This means we cannot rely solely on the markets but plan as a society to ensure that all have a fair go and challenge the notions that some are deserving and others are not. A good example of this has been the setting up of micro loans in some countries like Bangladesh. People who would never be lent money by banks were given microloans to start a small business. The women started up clothing or other businesses and were quite successful and due to this the whole village also began to prosper. So the challenge for us in the 21st century is not to be caught up in the language of deserving and undeserving but to work to get opportunity for all so that innovation

and therefore justice will help build a society where the common good is the priority and all may prosper.

5. So as we journey In the way of Jesus let us sit with these words from the Sermon on the mount and let them inspire us in our personal lives and encourage us to continue our advocacy for those for whom life is difficult.