

Plan 'Be' (Matthew 5.1-12)
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We've just heard two of the best-known passages in scripture – the powerful words from the prophet Micah about what the Lord requires of his people, and the introduction to Jesus' most-famous block of teaching, the *Sermon on the Mount* – a powerful statement on what it means to be a disciple/learner on the Jesus way. In essence, this 'sermon' addresses one of religion's key themes and questions: What constitutes true wellbeing and happiness – the 'good life'? In the beatitudes (the verses we've just heard), Jesus begins his answer, and from the get-go his words are surprising and confronting.

Picture the scene. Jesus, the holy man, an increasingly popular and intriguing figure has climbed a mountain on the shore of the Sea of Galilee (apparently this 'high' place stands at about 25 metres below sea level, making it one of the lowest summits of the world!). A large crowd has gathered and he sits down to teach; they draw in, straining to hear, and he begins: *'Blessed are the poor in spirit, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven. Blessed are those who mourn, they will be comforted. Blessed are the meek, for they shall inherit the earth.'* And as he speaks, I imagine more and more of their jaws dropping, and foreheads scrunching. *Blessed are those who hunger and thirst for righteousness; blessed are the merciful... the pure in heart... the peacemakers... persecuted... and falsely accused.* The who? The what?

Now, of course, most of us are familiar with these words; it's hard to hear them as if for the first time, to get a full sense of how countercultural they are, but just think. If we were to do a street survey of what constitutes the good life, I don't reckon one word of Jesus would be mentioned. What we'd hear would be things like: Blessed are the smart, the healthy, the good looking – those with a good upbringing and genes; happy are the winners and the wealthy; the popular, the respected, the leisured; those who don't get sidelined or undermined, those with good families, and hearts that haven't been broken; blessed, lucky, are those without a care in the world and blessed indeed are those with air conditioners in their bedrooms!! That's what most Aussies would say, I suspect, and many of us would agree. These things *are* good, they make a difference. It's natural to find ourselves saying things like, 'I'm so blessed to have a nice home to go to, and friends who keep in touch, and kids whose lives are going well'. So, what's this about poverty and mourning, and persecution and being maligned? How do these things equate with happiness? Jesus, what are you saying?

Well, I guess the first thing to notice is that Jesus is talking about a 'blessedness', a 'happiness' that goes beyond circumstances – that's not contingent on things always going smoothly and turning out. Rather, it's a blessedness, a joy that comes from participating, sharing in the life and love of God. And he's talking about the ways of being, the dispositions that open us to this enlivening connection. What he wants us to hear and realise is that the deeper we are immersed in God, the more we experience a joy, a satisfaction that is available *whatever* our physical health, our financial means, and life

circumstances. This, for Jesus, is the treasure in the field, the pearl of great price – this intimacy with God that surpasses and suffuses everything else.

So how do we make this connection, participate in this ‘good life’, receive – enjoy – this blessing? This is where the beatitudes come in – from ‘beatum’ meaning ‘blessedness’ in Latin; ‘makarios’ in the Greek – happiness. Blessed are the poor in spirit, Jesus begins, *for theirs is the kingdom of heaven*. But hang on, isn’t this the opposite of what I’ve just been saying? Aren’t we supposed to be *rich* in spirit? Aren’t we seeking an abundance of spiritual gifts? What’s so good about being ‘poor in spirit’, then? What does Jesus mean?

At heart, ‘poverty of spirit’ is the realisation that on our own, of ourselves, we have nothing to rely on spiritually speaking – no credentials. To be ‘poor in spirit’ is to recognise that we have nothing with which to buy God’s favour. Pride is a barrier; spiritual poverty is undefended nakedness before God. ‘This is the one to whom I will look’, God says in Isaiah (66.2), *‘the humble and contrite in spirit’*. Thus, says the one *‘who inhabits eternity, whose name is Holy’*: I dwell *‘with those who are contrite and humble in spirit’* (Isaiah 57.15). *‘Blessed are the poor in spirit, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven’*, Jesus says, echoing this theme.

And what’s so ‘blessed’ about this place? In the Scriptures, the place of poverty of spirit is the place of transformation. It’s when we get to the end of pretence and pride, of trying to prove ourselves good and perfect ... often exhausted and deeply sad, often with a sense of failure, even hopelessness; it’s when we give up and let go that God comes, that something happens. It’s called grace, and it’s the great blessing. We see this change in the disciples

after Jesus' death. At that point they are thoroughly disillusioned and exhausted – they got nothin'. And, it's in that state, they encounter the risen Christ; 'new life from moral and material nothing' (Rowan Williams). And, from that moment, everything starts to change. We see it in Paul's conversion as well. One minute, he's off to a perfectly respectable lynching in Damascus, and the next, he's knocked off his horse – suddenly realising that all his efforts to prove himself, all that zeal for God has been misplaced. And, from that moment, everything changes.

Laurence Freeman (2008.76) said: 'If we want to understand poverty of spirit, we have to accept it as the reaching of the boundaries of our being and our capacity, and finding we are unable to go further by ourselves'. 'Poverty of spirit is a "grand poverty",' he says, 'because when we have touched this boundary of being ... , it surprisingly recedes and marvellously our being expands. That is the resurrection'.

And this teaching on poverty of spirit leads into and sheds light on the rest of the beatitudes. As our being expands, as God comes alive in us, we discover a growing capacity for compassion and consolation; caring and bearing sorrow – the tears of the world. '*Blessed are those who mourn, for they shall be comforted*'. As our being expands, there is a growing capacity for meekness – humble, gentle, strength; courageous forbearance. A growing taste for righteousness, for justice. A new willingness to be merciful. A desire for simplicity and integrity – purity of heart. A yearning for peace and reconciliation – peace *making*. Strength, resilience to stand, and withstand the slights and slings of those threatened by a Christlike way of being.

The more we look at *Jesus'* picture of the good life, his plan for true blessing (plan 'Be'), the more we see it as all of a piece. Emptied of SELF (self-deception, self-importance, self-justification, self-satisfaction), we are disposed to the joy of heaven – to be filled with God's gracious kingdom; to bear what Paul called 'the fruit of the Spirit' (Galatians 5). They are all of a piece, these beatitudes, and it begins at the place of poverty – *blessed are the poor in spirit*. So, in closing, a few words about practising this poverty.

Sometimes we just find ourselves in this place – like the disciples, like Paul. Failure, rejection, exhaustion, and severe loss can all bring us to the end of SELF, to the place of repentance and transformation. We have little control in this. But we can also, in a sense, practise poverty of spirit – touching and waiting at this boundary, where we can receive this gift of expansion – resurrection. This for me, is where contemplative prayer or meditation comes in, and why it's so important. To enter into poverty of spirit, we have to let go of SELF and all its ways of keeping us defended from reality, from God – self-talk, busyness, anxiety and distractedness. That's how we become poor, by relinquishing our thoughts, our words, our imaginings, our plans, our memories – everything that clutters our surface mind (even so-called 'spiritual' thoughts, which are still affected by the ego); and consenting to simplicity.

That's what Christian meditation is – the practice of praying in utter simplicity – pure prayer. There are no words, it's a practise of silent attention and receptivity. In this prayer there's the absence of 'I' as a separate ego, we are letting go of self-consciousness, self-analysis and expectation, we're not trying to 'possess' anything; we leave self behind in order to follow him. 'As we

leave every thought, every image, as we break or leave behind this centredness on our ego, we are making a total surrender of our whole self to God', writes Laurence Freeman '[T]he closer we come to God, the happier we become'. Jesus said it like this: 'Blessed (happy) are the poor in spirit, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven'.

If you'd like to learn more, during Lent, Sarah and I will be running an Introduction to Christian Meditation. Also, there's 20 minutes of meditation at St N's every week day at 12.30. All are welcome.

References

Freeman, L (2008) *Light Within: Meditation as Pure Prayer*, Canterbury Press, Norwich.
Freeman, L (2019) *The Ego on our Spiritual Journey*, Medio Media, London.