

Christ Shining Through

Today's passage from Matthew's gospel is one that I've always thought was a bit bonkers! The Greek word for blessed – *Makarios* – translates as happy, in the sense of deep contentment, but also meaning being favoured by God. So Jesus is saying that '*happy* are those who are poor in spirit', or simply *poor* in Luke's account of the same event; '*happy* are those who have been bereaved'; '*happy* are those who are meek', '*happy* are those who are persecuted for their faith' and so on, and I think '*this is so unreal*'. This is not the way the world is. The poor have no wealth to spend, no property to sell, nothing set aside for a rainy day. They search down the sides of sofas for pennies for bus fares, have no slippers or dressing gown if they are taken into hospital, no money to buy birthday or Christmas presents unless they go into debt. Where's the happiness in this? Yet Jesus says they are blessed and that the kingdom of heaven is theirs. And happy are those whose commitment to God provokes persecution? *Really?* Tell that to the families who have fled Syria. *Blessed, happy?* Well, maybe in the next life, you might think, but of what use in this life is '*pie in the sky when we die*' thinking?

So what on earth is Jesus going on about? Is it really all complete nonsense?

To understand what Jesus *is* saying, we need to consider the context – what society was like at the time, who he was talking to, who would have been listening and what his words meant to those first listeners.

We know that news of the presence and power of Jesus had spread like wildfire, far beyond the confines of the lakeside towns and villages. Wherever he turned up, people brought to him all who were ill with various diseases, the demon-possessed, those who were paralysed, and he healed them. So, the day recounted in our bible passage, appears to be a day like many others. He was being followed by a crowd but, instead of tending to their needs, he climbs a mountain, gathers his disciples around him and begins to teach them. You don't know how many in the crowd could also hear, maybe just those nearby, or maybe the crowd quietened sufficiently for Jesus' words, from the vantage point of being higher up, to be heard by many.

In Jesus' teaching that follows – commonly called the Beatitudes – he turns the social order of the day upside down. If we find his words a bit of a muddle, a bit upside down, then so did those on the mountainside that day. In the

ancient world, those who were labelled '*blessed*' were those who were rich, who owned land, had honour and power and often good health, whose standard of living put them out of reach of the cares of this life. In contrast, the poor were not only those who had little, but those who had lost part or all of what they once had. In the New Testament, poor people are often associated with those who are humiliated, or are sick, naked and blind. In general, poor people were weak in every sense of the word.

By proclaiming that the poor are '*blessed*', Jesus is saying that the poor are now honourable. He turns the honour and shame codes upside down by stating that those who are seen as dishonourable and humiliated are now the honourable ones. He goes on to say that the kingdom of God belongs to these poor, to these beggars and destitute people. This theme is continued in the remaining Beatitudes, or blessings, when Jesus congratulates those who are hungry and those who mourn or weep. He assures the hungry that they will be filled and the sad that they will laugh. He is proclaiming the kingdom for them and offering hope that their misery will end, not in some distant future, but in the here and now. Having endured a lifetime of verbal assaults by the scribes and the Pharisees, those who were poor on the mountainside that day must have thought they had died and gone to heaven! You can see why they would have been attracted to his words. Everything that had previously been said about the rich, the well-to-do, was now being applied to them.

At the same time, those who had power and wealth would have been profoundly disturbed by such teachings. *Who* is Jesus to declare that God's kingdom belongs to poor, sick people? In a culture of limited goods, this teaching would have been seriously threatening to the rich as it implies that God runs things very differently to how they thought. If the hungry are to be fed, then the full might not get as much as they have come to expect. And, if the poor are to inherit the Kingdom of God, then they cannot continue to be marginalised and treated as the lowest of the low. So, on the mountainside that day, not only does Jesus offer hope to many, but he poses a threat to the elite. One group likes what he has to say, as they have much to gain, but the other finds it disturbing, as they have much to lose.

So this is no ordinary sermon. Each Beatitude challenges us to see and experience things differently. It is argued that the first beatitude – '*blessed are the poor in spirit, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven*' – forms the basis on which the others rest. The poor in spirit is sometimes helpfully paraphrased as '*those who know their need of God*'. No-one is arguing that being poor, having

very little, is in itself a blessing, but it's often when we've run out of our own resources, that we become aware of our dependence on God. And it's then that we can see the world and people in a very different light. We see them with the compassion and hope which God gives.

However, even if we now accept that the passage isn't bonkers, Jesus' challenge can still feel a little out of reach. Because, the values that he talks about are so different to the values we are used to living by, they get in the way. Values such as comfort, goodness, happiness, wealth, pride, feeling important. Just like the rich on the mountainside that day, we're not quite ready for those values to be turned upside down. So being poor in spirit, being meek, showing mercy, being pure in heart, still feel like standards that are impossible to reach. That are only for super-Christians. But maybe the reason for our difficulty is that we are still focusing on us, what *we're* able or not able to do. We're still holding on to our independence.

As they walked home from church one morning, a little girl turned to her mum and said, *'Mummy, there's something about what the vicar said today that I don't understand.'* Her mum asked her what it was. The little girl replied, *'Well, he said that God is bigger than we are. He said that God is so big that he could hold the whole world in his hand. And then we sang that song, 'He's got the whole world in his hand'. Is that true?'* The mum replied, *'Yes, of course that's true darling.'* *'But mummy'*, the little girl went on, *'he also said that God comes to live inside us when we believe in Jesus. Is that true too.'* Again, the mum assured the little girl that what the vicar had said was true, wishing though that it was him having the conversation with her daughter, and not her. With a puzzled look on her face, the little girl then asked, *'If God is bigger than us and he lives in us, wouldn't he show through?'*

And this is what the Beatitudes are about. If we allow Christ to live in us, it is *his* image that shines through. *His* attitudes, *not* ours. If we think about the Beatitudes in this way, then it stops us thinking that it's in *our* strength that we do good things, and stops us from taking the credit and becoming prideful.

And if it's Christ living in us, then try to imagine how life would be different if Christ took your place? What if he took your place at home? What if he performed your job at work? What if he took my place at this lectern? Yet, that is exactly what he wants to do. He wants *his* presence in our lives to affect every aspect of who we are and what we do. A challenge to how we live our

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lives which is as profound today as it was to those on the mountainside listening to Jesus.

Few would argue that his teaching is any easier to hear today, as it calls us to action, as individuals and collectively as a church, and has implications for our social and political world. As we leave this place today, let each one of us think how we could share what we have more fairly, even if that means giving up a portion of our wealth, and how we can live more simply in order than others may simply live.