

James Alison writes

The key feature of blessedness is that it involves living a chosen and cultivated sort of life which is not involved in the power and violence of the world, and which because of this fact, makes the ones living it immensely vulnerable to being turned into victims.

In the beatitudes people chosen as exemplars of proximity to God are all marginal, dependent people, who have a relationship to others which one might describe as precarious For instance:

the **poor in spirit** are poor relative to people who might use power and riches against them;

those who **mourn** are those who are in a relationship of vulnerability owing either to some loss, or some overbearing situation;

the **meek** are meek in the midst of a social other that despises meekness;

the **merciful** refuse to be involved in a vengeful relation to the other, that is they don't insist on their rights over against another;

the **pure in heart** have acquired their purity of heart with difficulty in the midst of a world which does not encourage it;

the **peacemakers** are notoriously those who eventually get blamed by both sides for not using violence -- each side sees them as traitors and those who are persecuted for righteousness . . .

How do the beatitudes find concrete expression in the lives of disciples of Jesus? How are they translated into actions?

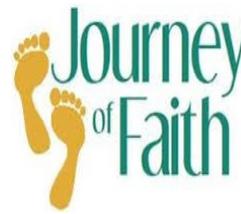
Have you experienced someone in your life who has lived the beatitudes out? What were their characteristics?

Which beatitude do you find the most difficult?

If you were to add another be-attitude what would it be?

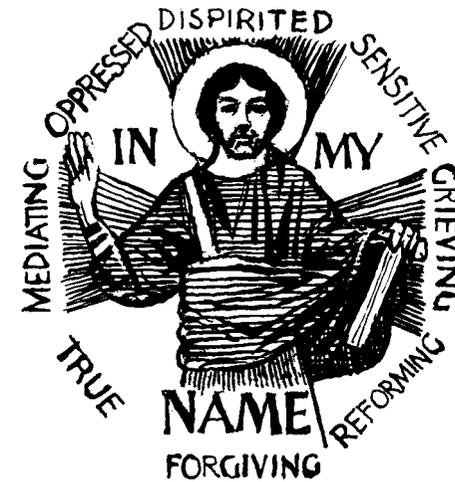
Conclusion:

Not to the wise and powerful of this world,
O God of all blessedness, but to those who are poor in spirit,
do you reveal, in Jesus, the righteousness of your Kingdom.
Gathered here, like the disciples on the mountain,
we have listened to Jesus the teacher, as he has spoken to us.
By the power of his word, refashion our lives
in the pattern of his beatitudes. Amen.



To be Catholic is to... let the
Be-attitudes of Jesus shape our lives!

Session 8 2016-2017



*Seeing the crowds Jesus went up the hill....*so begins one of the best known pieces of scripture. Our session tonight will attempt to help us see how the beatitudes and the Sermon on the Mount which opens with their proclamation fits in to the rest of Matthew's Gospel and how it can be food for us on our faith journey at this time in our lives.

The infancy stories and passion stories aside, there are **five** major parts to Matthew. In each one of them, Jesus features strongly as a **teacher**. His concern in his preaching is the Kingdom of God, its presence, its power and its mystery.

The Sermon on the Mount portrays Jesus as a prophet like the prophets of old, preaching the true meaning of the Law of Moses. It uses the literary device of *contrast* to show that this Jesus is seeking to fulfil and perfect the law; he will show that faith is a *doing* word, it is something to be **done** as well as something to be **believed**. Matthew contrasts the scribes and Pharisees with the disciples of Jesus and how they are to demonstrate to the world a **lived faith**. "It is not those who say to me Lord, Lord who will inherit the kingdom, but those who do the will of my Father in heaven....Be careful not to parade your good deeds before men to attract their notice....if your virtue goes no deeper than that of the scribes and Pharisees you will never get into the kingdom of God".

The emphasis of the scribes and Pharisees on obedience to the law is self serving and exemplifies **not** trust in God but the attempt to manipulate God for the benefit of yourself.

Where does Matthew get his gospel material from?

The Gospel of Mark forms the back bone of Matthew's narrative, most probably the work of the scribe at Rome basing the Mark text on the preaching of Peter. Communication between Rome and Syria was excellent and there was a growing affinity between the Christians of both areas after Peter and Paul had gone to Rome and been martyred there.

There is also another source which was pretty primitive and never became a gospel in itself but probably stems from an early attempt in Palestine to put together some sayings of Jesus. This document is used by Matthew and Luke.

Then there is a third source – of material only contained in Matthew. In writing the gospel, the evangelist's task was to embrace, reinterpret and synthesise into a harmonious narrative, all the traditions and sources available to him, all the time proclaiming Jesus as the Promised One, the longed for Messiah. The salvation Matthew announces is the fulfillment of the promise made to Abraham "I will make you a great nation", continued in Moses, helped along by the prophets and now climaxing in the sending of God's Son, the Messiah. The beatitudes open this teaching homily, demonstrating the graced life of being saved from a preoccupation with yourself, with a new consciousness of your neighbour, and a willingness to serve.

To whom is the Sermon on the Mount addressed?

It seems from the introduction and the "crowds", that it is addressed to all Israel gathered to hear Jesus. It is obvious that the teaching and the healing ministries of Jesus drew people to him from all over. While the disciples have a prominent place Jesus also addresses the "crowds". Remember last week his public call to repentance and his individual call to the people at the seashore. At the end of the sermon Matthew notes that the crowds are "astonished" by his teaching (7:28-29). A basic theme of this sermon is that Jesus comes not to abolish the law and prophets but to complete them

So who are *blessed*? Let's read the text!

One writer, John O'Grady comments:

"The Sermon on the Mount is not a new set of laws, but a proclamation of the Gospel. God has entered into the believer's life and now he or she can live life based on that good news. The sermon is not ethics or morality but a lived faith which is actually experienced, at least sometimes in life. We are not concerned with a perfectionist demand".

Francis Beare adds:

"The words *Be perfect as your heavenly father is perfect* should not be interpreted as demanding our best human effort to attain the unattainable", (thus we would always be doomed to failure [KG]) "but rather our total "engagement" without half measures or reserve".

Connecting the exhortations of the sermon to their original Jewish context may be helpful to us:

For example, Jesus' demand to offer no resistance to injury, take no revenge, and turn the other cheek, to give both shirt and coat and carry the burden a second mile sound like calls to be walked all over by others. But note these background points to the culture of the time:

- The first blow with the right hand on the right cheek was not a punch but a "put-down", given with the back of the hand by masters to slaves, parent to children, Romans to Jews. It is easier to hit the left cheek with the right hand but easier to hit the right cheek with a right handed back hand. So when *turning the left cheek* you are saying to your oppressor, "Hit me as an equal". In that society, retaliation of the slave to the master would have been suicide, so Jesus at leads calls for a stance against humiliation.
- ◆ Only the poorest of the poor would have nothing but an *outer garment* to give as collateral for a loan; when the powerless could not repay a debt, the creditor hauled them into court to get repayment (down to their last possession). Even if the powerless could not change the system they could take a stand for human dignity, if they surrendered both shirt and coat they would stand in court naked. Nakedness was taboo in Jewish culture, and the shame fell not on the person naked but on those looking at him.
- ✦ The command to walk the second mile is made in the context of the Roman law and practice of limiting the forced labour that soldiers could demand from people; a mile was enough for the labourer to carry a pack; Jesus is saying "Take the initiative" but the soldier would have to say, to avoid punishment, "Give me back the pack".