

Blessed Be

Matthew 5:1-12

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.”

Today’s Gospel is one of the most familiar readings in the entire New Testament. Early in his ministry, the crowds follow Jesus to a hillside overlooking the Sea of Galilee, and there, amid the gentle breezes, Jesus lays out his agenda. Blessed are the poor in spirit. Blessed are those who mourn and who hunger after righteousness. Blessed are the merciful and the pure in heart. Blessed are the peacemakers.

We know it so well that we can recite the litany almost from memory. Some of us might even have these Beatitudes emblazoned on a bookmark or copied in calligraphy and framed, hanging on the kitchen wall.

But I wonder if it isn't worth looking at them anew. The first thing that strikes me is the verb tense. The second part of most of the Beatitudes points toward the future. Jesus says the meek *will* inherit the earth and that those who are merciful *will* receive mercy. The pure in heart *will* see God, and those who are persecuted *will* receive their reward in heaven. This strikes me as both sensible and off-putting, to be honest. Sensible in that we know from observation, and sometimes from bitter experience, that the meek do *not* inherit the earth – surely not in this life. This world, more often than not, belongs to those who are cunning and ruthless, not to those who are meek. So Jesus is pointing here to some future reward. The meek, even though Jesus calls them “blessed,” will have to wait their turn.

Such an assurance is off-putting because the promise seems vague and remote. We don't like that. We live in an age of instant gratification, and we want the payoff now, not in some distant future.

But if we examine the text more closely, we have this odd juxtaposition of present and future tenses. “Blessed *are* the meek, for they *will* inherit the earth.” “Blessed *are* the merciful, for they *will* receive mercy.” And in one of these Beatitudes, the blessings are here and now. Jesus says, “Blessed *are* the poor in spirit, for theirs *is* the kingdom of heaven.”

What are we to make of this odd and bewildering juxtaposition of verb tenses? Jesus, I believe, wants to collapse the distinction between this world and the next. He wants to bring the kingdom of God into this world, to the here and now. No, the meek may not inherit the earth in this age, but the meek are blessed nevertheless. And they are blessed because their actions, their disposition, are a portent of the age to come.

So too with those who are merciful and who are pure in heart and who thirst after righteousness. They are blessed, Jesus says, because they are countercultural, because their sensibilities are the sensibilities of the kingdom of God.

The followers of Jesus, then, are citizens of two worlds. And it is our task, as people of faith, to inhabit both worlds, to comport ourselves according to the principles that Jesus articulates – meekness, peacemaking, showing mercy, hungering after righteousness – even as we recognize that those are not the regnant values of this world and that the eventual enshrinement of those principles awaits the world to come.

And yet – and yet! – Jesus assures us that living in this countercultural way brings blessedness to those brave enough to seek after righteousness and show mercy to others, to those who are meek and who aspire to be peacemakers. That’s the payoff, if any were needed: We are blessed in this life.

In the remarkable 1996 motion picture *Spitfire Grill*, Percy Talbott, recently released from prison, seeks to start over in the tiny town of Gilead, Maine. Percy brings with her a checkered past, but she is a goodhearted soul who seeks to live a good life, a life that exemplifies many of the qualities that Jesus articulated there on the Galilean hillside.

Not everyone in Gilead shares those values, of course. Percy, despite her manifest compassion and kindness, is met with suspicion, even hostility. She lives in the community, but she is never fully accepted as a member of the community. And those suspicions eventually bring tragedy.

In many ways, Percy Talbott exemplifies the dual citizenship that Jesus talks about in the Beatitudes. Arguably, Percy never reaps the earthly benefits of mercy and meekness and peacemaking and seeking after righteousness. Those rewards await her in the next world. But those qualities, Jesus assures

us, mark her as “blessed” in this life – and they redound to the benefit of all those around her.

Identifying ourselves as followers of Jesus and seeking to embody the values he taught us back there on hillside overlooking the Sea of Galilee mark us as countercultural. We are inhabitants of this world, yes. And, make no mistake, it is an imperfect world because the meek do not rule. But even though we inhabit this world, we are not fully citizens because we subscribe to different, higher standards. That behavior has its own intrinsic rewards in this life – as well as the life to come.

Blessed are those. Blessed are we who seek to live according to the words and the example of Jesus.

Fourth Sunday after the Epiphany

January 30, 2011

Christ Church

Middle Haddam, Connecticut