

All Saints

Readings: Revelation 7: 9-17, Psalm 34: 1-10, I John 3: 1-3, Matthew 5: 1-12

Our gospel reading today forms the beginning of Jesus' Sermon on the Mount, a discourse that contains the first teachings of Jesus that Matthew gives us. Luke gives us a similar sermon, but has Jesus delivering it in a plain instead of a mountain. Matthew's placing Jesus on a mountain inevitably reminds us of Moses' ascent of Mount Sinai, where he received the Ten Commandments. But we should note that today's lesson Jesus is not giving us commandments; he is simply describing situations in which people are blessed by God, situations which, taken together, are commonly known as the Beatitudes.

I have always been puzzled by the first of these, the one that describes the poor in spirit as blessed. When I think of being poor in spirit I think of someone who is completely lacking in confidence, someone who may be mired in inaction. Phrases like this are the reason we need commentaries to help us understand the Bible. What I have gleaned from my reading of commentaries is that Jesus is here referring to people who are not puffed up with a sense of their own righteousness, people who are not like the Pharisee whose prayers simply recounted how good he was, but those who are, like the sinner in the parable, aware of their imperfection and their dependence on God (Luke 18: 9-14). In other words, those who are poor in spirit are those who look to God for forgiveness and direction, those who put God, not themselves, centre stage.

The meaning of 'Blessed are those who mourn' is pretty evident. Unlike those who heard the Sermon on the Mount, we, on account of Easter, know the truth that lies behind this beatitude. We are comforted in the face of death by the knowledge that, although we mourn the loss of loved ones, we know that death is not the end. My commentaries have showed me that this beatitude might also refer to those who mourn the injustice, violence, and oppression that exist in our world. They can be comforted by the knowledge that God will in the fullness of time bring in God's kingdom.

'Blessed are the meek' is quite similar to 'Blessed are the poor in spirit.' Again commentaries come to our aid here. They tell me that the meek are people who are gentle and non-violent in spirit, just as God is never coercive with us. God in Jesus invites us to follow him, but never forces us to do so.

The meaning of 'Blessed are those who hunger and thirst for righteousness' hinges on the meaning of righteousness. This word refers to just dealing or justice. Those whom this beatitude describes are like those who mourn the state of injustice in this world and long for God to set things right.

'Blessed are the merciful' is not difficult for us to understand, especially if we think

of the mercy God in his love extends to us.

‘Blessed are the pure in heart’ needs some examination. Like ‘Blessed are those who mourn,’ it can have two meanings. The self-evident meaning is that God blesses those whose thoughts are good or pure. It is easy, of course, to speak of purity of heart, but difficult to attain. I am reminded of Guthlac, who came to the island of Crowland to live a life of prayer, only to find that he was beset by demons. I believe that what he described as demons were simply his impure or sinful thoughts. My commentaries have pointed out that this beatitude can also refer to those for whom God is at the centre of their lives, as is the case with those who are poor in spirit.

‘Blessed are the peacemakers’ requires, I think, no comment.

The last two beatitudes refer to those who suffer on account of acting in a righteous or just way and those who suffer on account of their trying to show the love of Jesus in their lives. Jesus here reminds his persecuted followers that they can be strong in the knowledge that, although their suffering in this life may be great, their reward in the life to come will make up for it. In these beatitudes Jesus is clearly saying that suffering will come to those who follow him.

I said at the beginning of this talk that these sayings are not commands but descriptions of those whom God blesses. Since, however, it is Jesus who is saying these words, we can and do extract from them the idea that we should strive for the qualities these sayings describe. We can see these qualities as hallmarks of what it means to be a Christian.

The Beatitudes are also examples of how Jesus engaged in teaching, not by issuing edicts, but by describing situations or telling stories, all of which have a way of sticking in our minds and causing us to figure out for ourselves what it means to be his followers. As we, his disciples here in Crowland today, go about our business of seeking to follow Jesus, we might do well to follow his example whenever we seek to understand our faith or explain it to others.

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