

**Blessed**

*Psalm 15; Matthew 5:1-12*

What does it mean to be blessed, or, to use different translations of the Greek word *Makarios*, what does it mean for us to be fortunate, or happy? Every culture has its own definition of success. In Jesus' time, it would probably feature freedom from domineering rulers, oppressive tax collectors, and capricious soldiers. It might well include the respect that comes from savvy negotiating skills in the marketplace. In the Near East - ancient and modern - the list would certainly include the ability to provide for one's household, and having one's family enjoy health and prosperity.<sup>i</sup>

The original meaning of 'blessed' in the Bible has the sense of, 'deep contentment' and also, 'being favoured by God'. It speaks far more of an ease within one's own skin and within a living relationship with God Who stands alongside in the good and the bad times. There is a sense of trust in this idea of 'blessed'.

In the constitution of the United States there is a declaration that all should have access to, 'life, liberty and the pursuit of happiness'. But can we pursue happiness directly, or do we achieve or receive happiness as a by-product of the pursuit of something else, like the way of love and justice, or the service of God, or a definite choice made by an individual to help and grow the community that is around us.<sup>ii</sup>

The beatitudes in Jesus' Sermon on the Mount are part of what it means to be and to act as a Christian. Jesus sits down and opens His mouth to teach, a Bible indication that what is to come next is of substance. He addresses His disciples and the crowds that had gathered by the Sea of Galilee. Visible and audible, Jesus is teaching and preaching, advising and consoling, all at once.

Jesus is talking not only about the life of heaven, but life on earth. The beatitudes, the blessings of Jesus, are a summons to live in the present that reveals God's heaven now. In Jesus, heaven and earth become one. These are not just noble words, they point to the imperative of necessary action. Don't just speak it, live it. That's what it means to be a Christian.

When we look at these blessings we admire the poetry and structure, but we fear the implications of putting these words into practice. We live in a time when blessings given are to those who succeed, often at the expense of others. To be poor in spirit, peaceful, merciful, and meek will get you nowhere in a culture grounded in competition and fear. Who can survive attempting to live by this teaching of Jesus?

Each one of these blessings is an invitation to step out from the crowd and become a learner on the Jesus way. They invite a movement in our lives away from what is cherished by way of the world to a new way of being God's people in the midst of the world which God still cherishes, but wishes, with us, to transform.<sup>iii</sup>

Blessed are the poor in spirit can read as, 'Blessed are those who have the spirit of the poor.' The poor have no resources outside themselves. If they come into money, they know what friendship means; and they will often give all they have to others. The poor often think of God, because there is no other help. To be poor in this way is to be stripped of pretention and illusion, to know your need of God and to seek God with empty hands, and an open heard and mind. When help comes, the poor are often the most grateful. They know they are not in control. They are not sitting back, waiting for hand-outs. They do what they can to help others as much as themselves, and see in Jesus One Who knew what poverty was. They often see with Kingdom eyes and know that blessing comes when you receive, and blessing comes when you share.

Where is the blessing in mourning? There is little more shattering than the pain of loss. It is an emptiness, sometimes making us turn in on ourselves, or cut ourselves adrift from others in a desert of desolation. Mourning is a great stripper of illusion; it stops us from pretending we can cope on our own. When we mourn we weep not only for ourselves but for those we have lost. We may see, in time, our deep connection to those who have died, whether our relationship was good, bad or indifferent. We see some profound truths about what they were, as well as what we are as humans beings. Bereavement can help us look around at our world, and maybe impel us to do something in places where hurt is real. Not as a monument to the dead, but as a tribute to those who still live. *If* that happens, and it is a big *if* because it takes courage and strength, might mourning turned outward be a blessing which could help others? Can you see where a response to the pain of bereavement might, in time, bring something that is a positive blessing for those still alive? It is no small thing to donate time, or money, or talents as a positive response borne by grief and transformed into hope. That would be a blessing indeed.

The blessedness of the meek has nothing to do with fearful or grovelling timidity. It has to do with genuine humility, and in knowing what our place is in God's world and in God's eyes. Meekness in God's eyes is helping us to see that we are at ease within our own skins, with a humility that is open-eyed. It is not thinking too much *or* too little of ourselves. We are people about whom God has taken trouble to love and to care about, and bless. The meek are not God's, or the world's, doormats. They are people who have a good and honest understanding of who they are and what they are about, with God. Not in power, but in humility, they inherit the earth so that they may help others, and so help God. The blessing of meekness.

Blessed are those hungering and thirsting for righteousness. The people who wish to live lives of integrity within a world of hypocrisy. People who wish to put thought and words into action.

People who do not believe one thing but do another. What a strain, but what a goal. To be and to do the right thing, and find satisfaction when the goal is achieved.

Being merciful is one of the major themes in Matthew's gospel. Extending mercy is to provide help to the destitute; it is to be forgiving; it extends love to enemies and to people on the margins of the world; it is to work for healing; it is to have an irresistible love for the down-trodden and the broken and the fearful. It is no small thing to be merciful. God knows that in His mercy. Have you not met those who by their selflessness radiate a generosity of spirit which brings its own reward?<sup>iv</sup>

The pure in heart are blessed. Purity in visible action and behaviour because the heart within is pure. Purity of heart is to will one thing; purity is single-minded, it is single-mindedness with the object of letting the mind of Christ form and reform our minds. It means encouraging others and supporting them; it means looking for the good, and finding it, however hard we have to look. The pure in heart are those whose devotion to God is unalloyed. They see the world and its people in all their brokenness, but they are determined to keep on loving and helping and transforming, until in faces contorted by sin or greed or anger, the face of God, deep within each human, is seen at last. That kind of purity requires steely resilience. The face of evil is seen more often than the face of goodness.

Blessed are the peacemakers speaks loudly into today's news. In our fallen world peace is longed for in every arena - local, national, international. Yet restlessness, anxiety, despair, hostility and conflict are seen everywhere. Seen, then forgotten when they latest headline hits. God's peace is furthered in our lives and world by those who themselves are peaceable and who take the way of conscious peace-making and reconciliation. Peace seeks the welfare of all. It comes from within

and works its way out from thoughts to words to actions. Those who seek and establish peace imitate God and are God's children.

To attempt to live up to these ethics of Christian life, even partially, is to invite persecution. People who stand up for the cause of fairness, integrity, right, and speak truth to power are as liable to be pelted as praised.<sup>v</sup> Or worse. It is a brutal blessing.

The beatitudes, the blessings, are a shaking of our foundations, a radical call to a new way of life in attitude and action. We aspire to the beatitudes, the blessings, and whilst we may sometimes fail, sometimes, we succeed, and people are drawn to the light of Jesus, through our broken attempts, and through our dogged perseverance. We are Christ's flickering light. today. "Blessèd are you when..."

**In the Name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit**

**Amen**

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<sup>i</sup> *Christine Chakoian, Feasting on the Gospels, Matthew Vol 1, p75*

<sup>ii</sup> *Leith Fisher, 'But I say to you' p48*

<sup>iii</sup> *Ibid p50*

<sup>iv</sup> *Ibid p57*

<sup>v</sup> *George Macleod*