

*blessedness*  
a sermon preached on the  
*fourth sunday after epiphany*  
29 January 2017  
at  
*st john's*  
ANGLICAN CHURCH CAMBERWELL  
*by fr david moore, vicar*

Malachi 6:1-8; Ps 15; 1 Corinthians 1:18-31; Matthew 5:1-12

The epiphany – the making visible, the en-lighten-ment – on this fourth Epiphany Sunday is Jesus' teaching on *the nature of blessedness*.

The word in the Greek text<sup>1</sup> does not easily translate into English; demonstrated by the disastrous 'Good News Bible' translation 'happy'. The NRSV's 'blessedness' is probably as near as English can get. Even so, in a consumption-and-accomplishment power-of-positive-thinking culture even that word is prone to distortion, spawning a triumphalist tone not supported by the Greek word. Furthermore, 'blessed' in the Beatitudes is not to be confused with 'blessing', such as when Jesus takes the bread and blesses it. The Greek words are entirely unrelated.<sup>2</sup>

A helpful way of grasping what 'blessed' means in Jesus' teaching is to cast aside all our value judgements based on feeling and sentiment and accomplishment. 'Blessedness' is a state of being independent of how we *feel* about things. The Greek word describes the ancient gods; and when applied to humans refers to our capacity for transcendence, that inner state of joy which comes to be associated with salvation. It is this fact that enabled great saints of our tradition to describe themselves as 'blessed', even though the outer circumstances of their lives, or their inner affective states, seemed to suggest the exact opposite. Blessedness has more to do with connection; with being rooted, groundedness, with purpose, meaning, the 'kin-dom of God'. We could describe it as spiritual direction.

Carl Jung once declared that humans can endure any amount of suffering, so long as we are able to find meaning in that suffering. To discern the meaning of our lives – in spite of, and possibly even because of, the suffering we endure – is to perceive spiritual direction, to experience that transcendent state of being Jesus calls 'blessedness'.

Should we require 'proof' for this, then we need look no further than the Cross. "For [religious insiders] demand signs and [religious outsiders] desire wisdom, but we proclaim Christ crucified, a *scandalon* to [insiders] and foolishness to [outsiders]."<sup>3</sup> 'Blessedness' and 'foolishness' are thus closely related;<sup>4</sup> yet another reason why the true *evangel* of Christ is not a marketable product.<sup>5</sup>

From this we can see that 'The Beatitudes' indeed make *visible* the paradoxical nature of the Kingdom. Jesus' teaching makes blessedness visible in nine paradoxical statements. In every statement the condition Jesus calls 'blessedness' is a surprise, a reversal of what our culture encourages us to strive for.

We are not inclined to think of poverty of spirit as a good thing. Neither mourning. We will not find much support for meekness as a priority in government or in business. In our culture we associate those who hunger and thirst as society's losers. The merciful will almost certainly fail on the stock market. The pure in heart are mere dreamers with nothing useful to offer the world of hard pragmatism in a 'market economy'. We like the sound of peacemakers, but the global arms trade and the closing of borders to refugees betrays the truth about us. We may consider that those who are persecuted for righteousness are in some manner special, but we certainly have no desire to emulate their suffering. And no one in their right mind desires to be reviled and hated and have all kinds of evil falsely uttered against them!

In the centre of these paradoxes is the fourth teaching: "Blessed are those who hunger and thirst for righteousness, for they will be filled."<sup>6</sup> To hear this teaching we need to translate the word 'righteousness' into a contemporary mode; because that word has been so hijacked in Western Christianity by moral perfectionism, puritanism, and 'KPI' productivity. By contrast, our spiritual father Abraham was considered 'righteous' for none of this; rather, because he was willing to undergo the risky and dangerous journey into the unknown, to place the quest for God, 'faith', at the centre of his life.<sup>7</sup> This makes the critical difference. That is, those who hunger for righteousness are those who hunger for spiritual evolution.<sup>8</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> μακαριοι *makarioi*

<sup>2</sup> The Greek word which is sometimes translated as 'blessing', but also as 'give thanks', is ευλογεω *eulogeō*.

<sup>3</sup> 1 Corinthians 1:22-23

<sup>4</sup> 1 Corinthians 1:21

<sup>5</sup> 1 Corinthians 1:18

<sup>6</sup> Matthew 5:6

<sup>7</sup> Genesis 12:1-4, Romans 4:22, Hebrews 11:8

<sup>8</sup> Fritz Kunkel, *Creation Continues: A Psychological Interpretation of the Gospel of Matthew*, Mahwah: Paulist Press, 1987, p66.

Everything hangs on this hunger for spiritual evolution. It is for this reason that “those who follow Jesus grow hungry and thirsty on the way.”<sup>9</sup> This is why the Beatitudes are not primarily an ethical teaching – in spite of what the Western Church may have taught us! They are instead an illuminating vision of the spiritual trajectory of human life, a vision of the kin-dom of God,<sup>10</sup> the trajectory of transcendence.

Let us pause for a moment and reflect on the principal biblical characters who have been our guides during Christmas-Epiphanytime. Consider the Magi. They are blessed because, knowing their poverty of spirit, they take the risk of leaving the security of all they know, journeying in search of the new-born ‘star’ who is spiritual enlightenment. Mourning the loss of their old dispensation, their no longer belonging to their own people, is the foundation and source of their blessedness.

Or consider the shepherds. They are blessed because, knowing they were neither wise nor powerful nor noble ‘by human standards’<sup>11</sup> that is, knowing their *emptiness* – probably a better English translation for us than the now-compromised word ‘meekness’ – they are capable of being filled by that which turns out to be the everything-that-matters, which is what ‘inheriting the earth’ means in Jesus’ teaching.

Or consider Joseph and Mary. They are blessed because, knowing the violence and persecution of the self-righteous and puritanical, they are nevertheless free to be non-violently yet decisively themselves, which is what Jesus’ teaching about peace-making and mercy means. They are blessed because though they know only too well their own thoroughly human capacity for retribution and vengeance, and they know that people will utter all kinds of evil against them, yet they give themselves over instead to that inner stripping which cleanses, which is what Jesus’ teaching about ‘purity of heart’ means.

I mentioned Carl Jung’s observation about suffering being endurable so long as one can find its meaning. This touches on a delicate spot, highlighting the universal human problem, for which Jesus’ Beatitudes’ are a salve, medicine. Suffering is an unavoidable factor of life; indeed, biologically speaking, cosmologically speaking, it’s the *necessary factor* in all evolution. Our problem is that our suffering has the propensity to cause a decrease in our ‘purity’, filling to overflowing that space within us which needs to be hollowed out for God, for that which is infinitely more than ourselves. Our ‘mourning’, our life’s suffering tends towards egocentricity, making us bitter and negative. All of us know this; all are acquainted with the negative potential of our suffering.

Jesus’ teaching is thus en-lighten-ment – an *evangelion* – precisely because in its light that same suffering finds its meaning, its transcendence, guides our spiritual evolution, increases our capacity to leave the security of all that has until now given us our identity and belonging. This is the freedom of the gospel of Jesus; the root and ground of true blessedness.

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<sup>9</sup> Dietrich Bonhoeffer, *The Cost of Discipleship*, London: SCM, 1959, p100.

<sup>10</sup> Brendan Byrne, *Lifting the Burden: Reading Matthew’s Gospel in the Church Today*, Collegeville: Liturgical Press, 2004, p55.

<sup>11</sup> 1 Corinthians 1:26