

Living the Beatitudes

“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.” (Silence)

That’s it. That is the best sermon ever. What could I say this morning that would even match those words? I feel like simply being silent with you to reflect on the Beatitudes. I would rather take a day or a week off to think deeply about that message, and to change myself to live the Beatitudes. Those beautiful and powerful words are not meant to be repeated over and over again, but lived out in our daily lives. I am sad today because I am aware that I have not been living the Beatitudes as much as I need and want. I ask myself; am I poor in spirit? Am I meek? Do I hunger and thirst for righteousness? Am I merciful? Am I pure in heart? Am I a peacemaker? Am I persecuted for righteousness’ sake? To be honest before God, I cannot say ‘yes’ with confidence, so I mourn. I am glad that Jesus included this, “Blessed are those who mourn”, because it gives me hope. Anyone who is far from living the Beatitudes still has a chance if he or she admits that they mourn.

The word “mourn” means to suffer grief. Jesus’ disciples mourned after they lost their leader, their Lord, who had been through a lot together with them; they were friends both in joy and sorrow. They mourned, because they could only watch helplessly as their friend was crucified and killed. Mary and Martha mourned at the tomb of their dead brother Lazarus, and Jesus also mourned and wept for his friend’s death. Like Jesus’ disciples, we mourn for a world that does not reflect the dreams that Jesus is seeking and dreaming with us. Like Mary and Martha, we also mourn when we lose our loved ones, and when we feel the pain of others. Mourning is a natural part of our characters - we don’t have to be taught how to mourn. Sometimes, though, we need to be reminded that

mourning is not just reserved for death or extreme circumstances. Mourning can have its place in stories of triumph and domination. It is so easy to mourn for the sick and dying – it is hard to mourn for lost qualities in ourselves

In the story of David and Bathsheba, David committed a sin, abusing his power as king to rape a married woman, and to have her husband, Uriah, killed. But he did not mourn for his sin or admit it until the Lord sent a prophet, Nathan, to reveal his own sin. It is interesting that King David did not feel sorry for his faithful soldier's death. His example shows us the difficulty of mourning for our own sins and how it is our nature to rationalize our behaviour. It's harder to mourn for our own sins because it's more painful, and it takes more time to realize them. I know that we are all good people, and I know that we have done many good things in our lives. But I think God does not ask us whether we are generally good or bad, or how many good things we have done. I think God asks us if our fundamental attitude is to rely on God for everything wholeheartedly. As Jesus tells us with the parable of the Pharisee and the tax collector, the tax collector was justified, not because he had done great things, but because he knew that he needed God's mercy.

So the question for us to live Beatitudes is whether you have room in your heart for God? Do you have room for God to meet you regularly, to talk with you, to be with you, to heal you, to change your life to be more like Jesus Christ? Your heart doesn't have to be spotless; it just needs to be available to welcome God into your daily life.

The audience in today's story was not just a random crowd. These were people who followed Jesus after they listened to his teaching, heard his proclamation of the good news, saw his healing ministry, experienced both his gentleness and his miracles. Some of them were probably just curious about the powerful new prophet, some of them brought their sick family members, some of them were just there by chance with their neighbours, and some of them were probably eager to learn from him, and to follow him. For whatever reason, every person in that crowd had needs that Jesus could meet on that mountain, at that moment. I think Jesus was aware of their needs, but instead of filling their every earthly need, he invited them altogether to a new way of life.

We don't know how many of them among the crowds were actually poor in spirit, meek, merciful, pure in heart, mournful, hungry and thirsty for righteousness, but we do know that all of them were invited to the same life, the blessed life in God's sight. Whether they felt challenged or comforted from that invitation, all of them were required not only to have faith in the kingdom of God but also to practice that faith which eventually will lead them to 'perfection', as Jesus said in Matthew 5:48, "Be perfect, therefore, as your heavenly Father is perfect." We know that we are not perfect, but I think the point is to persistently strive toward perfection by becoming as much like Christ as possible, with Christ patiently helping us along the way.

When I was praying at home the other day, I could understand what Jesus means by the Beatitudes to us. At home I have a tiny cozy prayer room. There is a small cross on the wall, a couple of icons, a candle and incense in the room. I sat at the cross, lit the candle, burned incense and then just looked at the icons and the cross, thinking that I needed prayer more than ever; you know sometimes we don't know what to pray or how to pray, and it's okay just to be there. I knew that I was not crying, but I knew that I was mourning from deep in my heart. I don't know why, but I do know that it was not me but the Spirit who was mourning, as the apostle Paul described in Roman 8:26, "The Spirit helps us in our weakness; for we do not know how to pray as we ought, but that very Spirit intercedes with sighs too deep for words." I felt understanding, comfort and healing from Jesus because I knew that he was also mourning at the cross. And I realized that the Beatitudes are his invitation for us to union with Christ, because he was the one who was poor in spirit, meek, merciful, pure in heart, a peacemaker, who mourned, hungered and thirsted for righteousness, and was persecuted for righteousness' sake. He lived the Beatitudes, most of all, so he is ready to help us.

If any of you think that you are not good enough to live the Beatitudes, like I thought, I want to remind you that you are still invited to look at the cross, in which you may find wisdom, strength, healing and comfort. And sooner or later you will find a bond between Jesus and yourself while you mourn in spirit. And this will be your story, "Blessed are those who mourn, for they will be comforted."