

Micah 6. 1-8

1 Corinthians 1. 18-31

Matthew 5. 1-12

Today and over the next two Sundays we hear from that famous text from Matthew we know as the Sermon on the Mount. The Monty Python crew in the Life of Bryan made terrible fun of our tendency to misunderstand someone's message when they parodied the Sermon on the Mount. Really the film is about our tendency to take ourselves too seriously in religious and political matters. As Jesus delivers the sermon, he is overheard by Bryan and others from too-great-a-distance. Bryan's mother, a little deaf, can't quite hear and becomes bored rather quickly. She would rather go off to a stoning. Blessed are the peacemakers says Jesus. Upwind Bryan and the motley group that are gathered with him on the next rise hear: Blessed are the cheesemakers. Blessed are the cheesemakers? "What's so special about cheesemakers," someone asks. A rather pompous guy in the group explains: "Well, obviously it's not meant to be taken literally; it refers to any manufacturers of dairy products."

We often launch into hearing the beatitudes without hearing their context; which I have added this morning because it is helpful to know who Jesus' words are directed to; or who it is who is overhearing them, gathered on the next rise, as it were. It is to the disciples that Jesus is speaking, but the background is the crowds: the sick, those who were afflicted with various diseases and pains, demoniacs, epileptics, and paralytics. Indeed, it is these who Jesus makes reference to at the end of Matthew's gospel, in his vision of the judgement: I was hungry and you gave me food, I was thirsty and you gave me something to drink, I was a stranger and you welcomed me, I was naked and you gave me clothing, I was sick and you took care of me, I was in prison and you visited me. Elsewhere Matthew tells us when Jesus sees the crowds, he has compassion for them, because they were harassed and helpless, like sheep without a shepherd.

Matthew tells us that Jesus teaches with authority, not as the scribes; that the crowds were astounded by his authority. This authority is a relational one – it's an authority which is ascribed to him by the crowds; they recognise the divine authority in him. As Moses sat down to give the law, so Jesus sits down to interpret and fulfill the law. But not only does he speak with authority, but he also acts with it; and the kingdom comes near.

Next week, we will hear Jesus tell the disciples that they are like salt, or like a light on a bushel; and they, like him, shouldn't be afraid of allowing their light to shine. So, as Jesus speaks to the disciples, with the crowd overhearing, there is some compact between the disciples Jesus addresses and the crowds who overhear. As though Jesus is saying to the crowds: these ones will bear the good news to you; They will authoritatively bring the reign of God near.

As we know there is a difference between authoritarian and authoritative. Vladimir Putin is authoritarian; people like Nelson Mandela and Archbishop Desmond Tutu were – and continue to be – authoritative for us. Mandela and Tutu both spoke and bore a word of truth and laid out a vision of the reign of God. And people recognised the reign come close; God with us.

We are part of the church needing to find its way again. The church many of us grew up in was authoritarian, where preachers and elders asserted an image of God which was overbearing and

concerned with our moral uprightness. People have rightly walked away from this kind of church and the image of God which went with it. Like the crowds, they were looking for an image of God with a sense of divine authority, which was life-giving, merciful, peace-proclaiming, not legalistic and censorious; an image of God who sees with eyes of mercy for people in need of compassion. This authoritarian image of God and the church seems to be a legacy that we are left with; it's maybe not the prevailing image we have in our own minds, but in the mind of the community around us it's still strong and there are still some in the church who want to speak of God in this authoritarian way. Like a friend of mine who was raised Roman Catholic and was taught by The Sisters of Mercy – he recalls his primary education, saying he was taught by the Sisters of No Mercy. The impact of cruel behaviour in the name of God is life-long.

In these beatitudes, these markers of blessedness, Jesus asserts that the way to God, the sense that God is near, is through a downward path. This is not the way by which the world measures worth or happiness – rather Jesus' measures of blessedness are commonly considered to be measures of weakness; affliction with things we just don't deserve. This downward path is the path to wisdom of which Paul writes to the church in Corinth: not many of you were wise by human standards, not many were powerful, not many were of noble birth. But God chose what is foolish in the world to shame the wise; God chose what is weak in the world to shame the strong;

This wisdom of God Paul writes of bears a strong resonance with the Beatitudes, all of which really fly in the face of what is considered to be the wisdom of the world. And maybe these are a measure for ourselves to consider to what extent we are really converted – to what degree our minds are transformed by the knowledge of Christ. What do we feel about the meek, those whose grief is not relieved by the passing of time, the pure in heart. What might it mean to be truly persecuted for the gospel?

Chris and I watched the granting of the Australian of the Year awards on Wednesday night. The speech by Senior Australian of the Year, Prof. Tom Calma, was truly inspiring and for myself seemed to overshadow the award of Australian of the Year to Taryn Brumfitt. Taryn is a writer and documentary maker and in her work is addressing the issue of body-shaming that is at epidemic proportions in the western world. She says that 70 per cent of Australian school children consider body image to be their number one concern. 70%! COVID has brought to the fore the psychological vulnerability of young people in Australia. We rightfully wonder about the future for them - rates of suicide, eating disorders, anxiety, depression, substance abuse. Is it true that 70% of them suffer with what you might call a form of self-loathing? How can this be allowed to be? What would be the point of more resilience programs in schools, of a greater availability of psychologists and other health professionals if this is the extent of the crisis? Taryn says: *We now know that young people with poor body image are 24 times more likely to be depressed and suffer from anxiety.*

To call for more resilience programs, to churn out more psychologists would be to make young people the problem; and to not admit that collectively we have allowed this epidemic to proliferate. This would be to say that they should be able to handle the pressure, to be able to lift their game, to not be sensitive to the collective bullying that obsesses over body perfection. Might we be willing to reign in social media, the fashion industry and the influencers? We were at a lunch on Australia day and a mother of an eight-year-old boy was telling us that her son is

putting on hair gel and cologne before he goes off to school. Whatever became of slugs and snails and puppy dog tails?

*We weren't born into the world hating our bodies, this is something the world has taught us," says Tanya. "Body-shaming is a universal problem, and we have been bullied and shamed into thinking our bodies are the problem.*

The setting of the Beatitudes is Jesus addressing the disciples, with the harassed and helpless crowds overhearing. In these measures of blessedness Jesus tells the disciples of the signs by which they may know the kingdom of heaven is near; the places where God may be found to be with us. In the poor of spirit, the meek, the peacemakers, as at the end of the gospel he says to the disciples as he describes the final judgement that he will be found in the least of these; the broken and rejected.

There is something about our young people that leaves me feeling that they are harassed and helpless. That the wisdom by which they are inducted into the world seduces them and then abandons them, as the powers in Jesus' time abandoned the crowds to poverty and religious fear.

Where does the church stand in relation to this mass of young people? How are we complicit in putting them onto the treadmill of suicide, eating disorders, anxiety, depression. Might we be willing to call it out – not run resilience programs but be with them and embody God-with-us. Might we be willing to suffer persecution for naming this scourge?

When Jesus sends the disciples out on mission, he sends them with very little. They are not to start a mission program, seek government funding in order to do good works. They are to go empty handed and proclaim the closeness of the reign of God; to bring it close and to embody it. Pope Frances, before he became Pope, as Archbishop Jorge Bergoglio, was instrumental in the revival of the Roman Catholic church in South America. One of the things he came to understand in his work and is that there is no justice without proximity; no justice without proximity. That is, the justice of God, the reign of God is brought close, simply by *being* close. Not through programs or systems or institutions but by people made in the image of God bearing the justice and mercy of God to each other. This is the miracle and the mystery of the Gospel; the miracle and the mystery of the incarnation. May we be granted grace and insight and wisdom as we seek God's path for ourselves and for each other as we seek to be signs ourselves of God's reign amongst us.

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