

Blessed are the Poor in Spirit

Rev'd Peter Balabanski

Epiphany + 4A – Micah 6 1-8, Mt 5 1-12

Jesus' Sermon on the Mount has always been the comfortable Church's greatest challenge. I remember a Bible study group where the leader asked what we'd think if he stood up at sermon time and simply read out the Sermon on the Mount – three chapters of Matthew's gospel. One person said they'd be disappointed. Was it disappointment that the preacher wouldn't prepare a sermon himself, or because the Sermon on the Mount is so very challenging. I'll never know. But all of us squirm hearing Jesus' words about the Law, about anger, retaliation, judging others and all his other teachings, because we know there's no other valid response but obedience.

Today's Gospel gives us the beginning of the Sermon on the Mount; the Beatitudes in Matthew's version. The hardest of Matthew's beatitudes for people like us to interpret is the first one; *Blessed are the poor in spirit*. Who are they? I imagine they were the people Jesus went out to – the ordinary people he gave this teaching to. Many of them would have been on the lower end of the social scale among a people who'd been colonised; the bottom rung on the ladder of a subject people.

They'd have been *materially* poor, that's for sure. They'd have lived a hand-to-mouth existence. And their poverty would also have been expressed in poor health, haphazard nutrition, a low life expectancy, and a shocking infant mortality rate. Their social influence as farm workers or boat hands on the lake would've been negligible. There'd have been little they might even imagine they could do to make life better for themselves or their loved ones. Their horizons would have been very

limited. Their spirits would have been effectively imprisoned by their poverty.

Blessed are the poor in spirit. We comfortable Christians are mostly screened from this de-humanising type of poverty; it's invisible to us. But like the humble folk who gathered around Jesus in Galilee, most people in today's world would be able to receive these words as a blessing offered directly to them. And not just a blessing, but a promise to hold on to as well; *yours is the kingdom of heaven.*

Exploited workers and unemployed in every country can hear this promise as their own. So can suffering Ukrainians, Sudanese, Burmese, Palestinians, Indigenous peoples and 120 million forcibly displaced persons. Jesus speaks directly to each of them, and many respond in trust. He speaks to people with little influence – like children. I hear an echo of his revolutionary promise when Jesus rebukes his disciples for stopping little children from approaching him. '*Let the little children come to me, and don't stop them; for it is to such as these that the kingdom of heaven belongs.*' ^{Matt 19.14} I'll bet those children's parents told them about that one!

These are the people I imagine Jesus meant when he declared *the poor in Spirit* as blessed. Occasionally, we number among them in times of grief and helplessness. It may sound strange, but I think those times when our power is gone are moments of opportunity. We must *seize on those moments* when we might actually sense our utter dependence on God's grace; seize on them and hold onto them. Because we have to be in a space where we know the poverty of our own spirits if we are to enter the Sermon on the Mount with hearts open to Jesus' power to disciple us.

In his ten beatitudes, Jesus names the qualities of those who are blessed. Those qualities are diametrically opposed to the ones sold to us as signs of blessing by our dominant culture. It's always been the case. We heard Paul tell the status-

driven Christians of Corinth that they had to understand the dramatic difference between the values of God's Kingdom and the shallow obsessions of their *new rich* society. They had to hold firm; to realise that those who are counted as blessed among the people of the Cross will be rubbished as fools in a world which, like ours, values wealth, power and control above everything else.

In our society, it's very tempting to go with the flow. It's very hard to hold on to the treasure that it is to be poor in spirit, to mourn, to be meek, to long for righteousness, to be merciful, to be pure in heart, to be peacemakers, and to accept as a reward for all that, ridicule, persecution and false accusation. Staying in those places of weakness – of foolishness – is to be where we can engage in the deepest compassion with people for whom there *is* no choice; *the poor in spirit*. The nine beatitudes which follow this first, defining one, speak to the same people. People in mourning. Decent, kind people who have no say, who just seek peace and a fair go.

The message for us in our comfortable world is pretty much the same as we heard last week. Our children must be able to learn from our example that everyone is loved and valued for who they are, and not for what they might accomplish.

They must live in a world where we nurture justice, mercy and faithfulness as our deepest values, regardless of the consequences to our material or social power. The Sermon on the Mount challenges every impulse that tempts us to worship status and wealth. The Beatitudes challenge us *not* to keep smiling when we're aching inside. They challenge us *not* to defend our turf; but instead to stand up for kindness and justice even though it's much easier to turn our eyes away; to choose to be trusting and kind, even if that makes us look gullible; to work for peace even at the risk of our own safety. When we need to remember this, remember the prophet Micah, who put it all absolutely plainly; *do justice, love*

kindness, and walk humbly with your God? Amen