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Micah 6:1-8

Psalm 15

I Corinthians 1:18-31

Matthew 5:1-12

The Beatitudes, and the foolishness of God.

The Beatitudes are amongst the most loved parts of Christian literature, and yet they are in some ways puzzling and challenging. In Matthew they are given at the commencement of Jesus' Sermon on the Mount. Matthew chooses the location carefully because the Mountain associates Jesus with Moses and this is meant to be the giving of the new law, corresponding to the old law that was given on Mt Sinai.

Each of the Beatitudes falls into two parts: the first describes the humiliation of the present, the second of the glory to come. Blessed are the poor in Spirit, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven. Blessed are those who mourn, for they shall be comforted. Blessed are the meek, for they shall inherit the earth. Blessed are those who hunger and thirst for righteousness, for they shall be satisfied.

These teachings are given to the inner circle, who had left all to follow Jesus. They are the poor in spirit, they are the ones who realize that they have no righteousness of their own, who are spiritual have-nots, and therefore hunger and thirst for God.

The Beatitudes that follow are more activist. Blessed are the merciful, for they shall receive mercy. Blessed are the pure in heart, for they shall 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.

It is the merciful, the single-minded, the peacemakers who will be blessed and promised a future relationship with God.

The Beatitudes reflect a puzzling mixture of disposition and circumstance, and yet they also do amount to a stance in life. They do not put forward conditions of excellence. They do not commend passivity. But they do speak of a vulnerability that some say describes the life of Christ himself in whom genuine humbleness before God expressed itself through merciful love shown to the world. If this is a true reading, there is a way in which the Beatitudes express the essence of Christian life, something to which all disciples can look as a norm, as they come to grips with living as followers of Jesus. The Beatitudes should not be seen as rules calling for effort. They are meant to show that life is found in longing for God and discovering God's divine gift. In Matthew the promises of the Beatitudes are made to the poor, the mourners, the humble, the hungry - those who lack, who wait, who are lowly and who are empty. What unites these people is that they find nothing in what the world offers, and look towards God for fulfilment. This does not mean poverty and sorrow for example are blessed for their own sake. There is no virtue in giving away all our wealth, or making ourselves miserable in the hope God will deliver a blessing. What it does say is that God's Kingdom - the new relationship God chooses to offer us - comes to those hearts which are receptive and those souls who, in their vulnerability, place no store on worldly wisdom or treasure.

This is core material. People who imbibe these sayings and seek to live by this norm

will find themselves in very different places and relationships in the world than some others. Furthermore, in context of Jesus' day, wealth and position had been looked upon as a sign of blessing from God. Jesus' attitude and message is a reversal of normal values. It is not difficult to see why many in Jesus' audience were revolted or offended by these words. But we can also see why there was gathered to him a crowd who came from the fringes of society, who found freedom and joy in his company while good people went away puzzled or angered. Being a Christian who lives in the world with the Beatitudes does involve a stance that prefers certain things over others, and if this were seen to be not so, we would wonder why.

This week there has been a lot of publicity given to the 60th Anniversary of the liberation of Auschwitz. As the scenes have appeared on our TV screens and brave people have shared stories of that horror, we can only ask how was it that a Christian people developed such a programme. Films like those of Leni Reifensteil shed some light. In them is pictured a will to power and a snobbism, the other side of which is hatred of others, ideals drawn from corrupted versions of philosophy and theology current at the time. There was a wish for self assertion and a determination to depart from anything connected with things like mercy or pity. The dark side of human life took over and the source of evil was lost from view. What we have been reminded of in the images of Auschwitz this week seems only possible where something other than the kind of stance reflected in the Beatitudes is given central place in life. The current cry from Auschwitz is "Never Again" and it is a cry we must heed as the gross injustice of Guantanamo Bay continues, and all around the world changes in the law are rushed through to give governments more power at the expense of human rights.

The Beatitudes link the source of life with a humble stance, which is reflected in Micah, and there is a powerful resonance with what Paul says about the foolishness of God. The Cross of Christ is God's wisdom and strength in the world. How could this symbol of a profoundly vulnerable life and death be the basis of wisdom and strength? Paul asserts that in this humiliating death God defies and overthrows the human standards and wisdom by which we normally rule our lives. God's foolishness is wiser than human wisdom, and God's weakness is stronger than human strength says Paul. Everything about God is a reversal of what seems reasonable or possible or desirable by human standards. The cross sits well with the Beatitudes and both become rather like lenses through which the presence and work of God in the world must be read.

And this material is paradigmatic for all areas of faith and living. Christian people are called to live, foolishly, as Beatitude people. How would this work out in practice if we were trying to make an ethical decision? The Cry of the Snow Lion is a film about the Chinese occupation of Tibet and the exile of the Dali Lama. It shows little about the inner teachings of Buddhism so it is hard to assess the extent to which the people lived in freedom and life prior to occupation. But there seems little doubt the invasion and the following form of cultural genocide is unjust. As the film draws to a conclusion you see the three forces involved. The Dali Lama and the Tibetans, the Chinese Communists and the world community, represented by American interests which once supported Tibet but now, in the interests of gaining a slice of emerging Chinese markets, are offering help that works against the Tibetans. In this context the Dali Lama has been trying to hold the line on non-violent resistance but, like Martin Luther King Jnr, is having trouble keeping the people together on this point. In the film he makes a speech about how Compassion must rule, and that this is the key to building the future for the people. There may be more to this story than I can glean, but based on what I saw, if you had to choose who to support in this struggle, and wanted to live a life of Beatitude,

then the Dali Lama's position is nearest to the side of the angels. His advocacy of Compassion is not passive, but neither does it seek to even the score.

This may seem a foolish and weak policy but the burden of the Beatitudes and the preaching of Paul suggests that the words, deeds and worship of the church must continue to make clear that God does not run according to the paradigms preferred by mortals. The burden for the church is that this is not grandiose knowledge. It is not a fantastic plan for conquering heroes or policy for corporate excellence. Compared with the usual paradigms of human reasoning and functioning, what the church says and does seems ineffectual and irrelevant. But the call to be faithful involves realizing that it is not toughness or grandiosity that matters. The call is to loving and believing. In this is the strength to stand against the invaders and the bullies. In this way a light not our own may shine through our words and deeds, and others may praise God and be blessed.