

Pentecost 5
13/7/2014

Mark the Evangelist

Isaiah 55 10-13

Psalm 126

Matthew 13:1-1, 18-23

Blessed are those who mourn

It is probably not possible, or acceptable, to preach a series on the Beatitudes of Jesus' without quoting a particular line from one of the more engaging theological reflections of the late 20th century: "Blessed are the cheese makers" (Monty Python's *Life of Brian*).

With this line, the Monty Python crew set up a joke about a group of people just too far from Jesus to be able properly to hear what he is saying. On hearing the saying about the blessed cheese makers the first question is, "What's so special about the cheese makers?" That is, why are they in the list? The observation of a nearby punter, that the saying is obviously not limited to cheese makers but extends to any manufacturer of dairy products, does not help.

Then comes blessed are the Greek who is to inherit the world – which leads to a conversation about which Greek it is. This is finally clarified: Blessed are the meek, with the remark following: "That's nice, I'm glad they're getting something 'cause they had a hell of a time".

For some the film is all too much, irreverent unto blasphemy. But, at least so far as the Sermon on the Mount is concerned, the problem is not mocking of the beatitudes but how well it models the way in which we typically hear them.

It is very easy to treat the beatitudes as a list of blessed human conditions or characteristics and, so, as referring to particular groups of people. With this list in hand, we are then invited to discover ourselves in them: Am I blessed as one poor of spirit? Or am I mourning? Or am I meek, or hungering and thirsting for justice, or merciful? The Beatitudes become, in this way, a "something for everyone" statement, kind of like a spiritual equivalent of a Myers Briggs personality type indicator. In this way we come to read the conditions which Jesus identifies as "natural" conditions, some of which we might suffer or enjoy, some of which we do not. But if approach them in this way we might as well join Monty Python and wonder why the cheese makers or the Greeks are there, or not there.

Treating as *natural* the conditions Jesus names is perhaps most the case with our beatitude for today: "Blessed are those who mourn, for they will be comforted." Grief and mourning approach being something like a universal experience: if we are lucky – or cursed – to live long enough, we will know mourning. Mourning has to do with permanent loss. It might be a mourning which arises from bereavement, or divorce, the failure of a friendship, a loss of independence due to age or ill health, or perhaps something less tangible like a loss of innocence, or reputation or faith. The things we mourn are things which are lost to us permanently.¹

¹ Loss which is temporary is only a nuisance or an inconvenience. We don't mourn being sick when we expect to get better, we don't mourn a loss of economic independence when we lose a job but expect to find another. Such losses are merely a matter of waiting, however patiently or impatiently. Such waiting, we expect, will come to an end but to mourn is to have lost something for good.

For the time being, however, it is the “naturalness” of mourning, and not the permanence of the loss, which gets in the way of our hearing the promise in what is said here. It is not that this kind of mourning does not matter, but that there is no automatic, natural reversal promised: that if you mourn now, later you will be comforted (we noted a couple of weeks ago that this is how Luke’s beatitudes might be [incorrectly] read, Luke 6.21,25).

To put the case most starkly, it is not natural an *unnatural* mourning which is here called blessed. This unnatural mourning is a kind of mourning we need to *learn*. An unnatural mourning is a mourning for losses we do not yet know we have sustained.

At a recent seminar I attended, some fun was had looking at some of the spiritual tracts which have been used to summarise the gospel for evangelistic purposes. You probably know the kind of thing – the Four Spiritual Laws, and so on. A typical tract tells us, first, that we are radically separated from God; second, that we cannot construct a bridge back to God; third, that God provides the bridge in Jesus (alone); and, fourth, that we must “believe in Jesus” to cash in on this offer (or be eternally damned).

As a summary of salvation history, this is not bad. Yet, as a proclamation of the gospel, it *is* (bad). This is not because of the dramatic language, poor print quality and implied threat which often goes hand-in-hand with these evangelistic “helps”. This telling of the story and invitation to believe announces to us something which we should mourn – that we have been radically separated from God. The problem is that, while this is true, it is for most people not true *yet*. That is, there are few who feel this, who mourn that they do not have God in their lives. Telling us that we are bereft in this way, and expecting us then to prayer “the Jesus prayer” (“Lord Jesus Christ, Son of God, have mercy on me, the sinner”) or something similar, is to require people to mourn when they have felt no loss. It treats the way to salvation as itself a list of things to tick off: affirmations to make, prayers to pray, things to do.

If we are to speak the gospel in a way which corresponds to the content of the gospel itself, the mourning does not come first but rather the joy. That is, the shadows of our lives are made clearer to us by the brightness of the light which shines from the face of Jesus-as-the-Christ.

If it is merely our sense of being bereft, our sense of poverty of spirit, our sense of being meek, our sense of injustice which is the basis for the blessedness or happiness Jesus speaks of here, then we do little more than bless ourselves. This is not to say that our feeling low, our pain at loss, our sense of emptiness are unreal or do not matter and that God cannot meet us in these places. It is to say, though, that our sense of the height and breadth and depth of our lives as hidden in Christ is something which is still being opened up to us.

And so, for example, the more we grow into realisation that the bread we take each week is not just a sign of a body broken for us but *by* us – that we would break the body of Jesus – the less it is just a kind of spiritual food and the more we are invited in the wonder of love which can forgive all things – even the crucifixion of God himself.

This is a learned mourning, but it is also a *com-forted* mourning, a strengthened-with mourning. We are not left alone in our discovery of the depth of what we can do, what we have lost, because it is only as God reaches out and takes us by the hand that are able actually to understand these things. It is the gospel that, having taken us by the hand in this way, God’s grip is firm, secure. And so this is a strange mourning not only

in that it must be learned but because it involves no shedding of tears because it is from the point of view of a promised restoration – the gift of grace – that we see what was lost, but is now already found again, from the point of view of what is now enlivened that we see what was dead.

It is only if we are close enough to Jesus – to the Jesus who has drawn near to us with unexpected love and life – that we can hear properly what he speaks about here, that we can learn poverty, mourning, humility. Otherwise, the Beatitudes might just as well be about cheese makers and Greek and anyone else we think should be mentioned, even if we do actually hear clearly his words but not the gospel which is their basis.

This is a God who blesses not those who imagine that they somehow correspond to a list of conditions, attributes or actions in the beatitudes but who blesses us with the poverty, the loss, the meekness, the hunger and thirst for justice which were Jesus' own, in the very moment that we are offered in him also the fullness, the joy, the exaltation and the satisfaction which is his.

A people so blessed know how to mourn because they have something to celebrate, know how to be poor in spirit because they are blessed with spirit, know the thirst for righteousness because they have been justified, know humility because they have been made strong.

For such surprising, back-to-front gifts, unasked for and yet precisely what we have always needed, thanks be to God, Father, Son and Holy Spirit. Amen.
