

Epiphany 4
29/1/2017

Mark the Evangelist

Micah 6:1-8

Psalm 15

1 Corinthians 1:18-31

Matthew 5:1-12

The blessed are the hopeful

³ *'Blessed are the poor in spirit, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven.*

⁴ *'Blessed are those who mourn, for they will be comforted.*

⁵ *'Blessed are the meek, for they will inherit the earth.*

⁶ *'Blessed are those who hunger and thirst for righteousness, for they will be filled.*

⁷ *'Blessed are the merciful, for they will receive mercy.*

⁸ *'Blessed are the pure in heart, for they will see God.*

⁹ *'Blessed are the peacemakers, for they will be called children of God.*

¹⁰ *'Blessed are those who are persecuted for righteousness' sake, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven.*

¹¹ *'Blessed are you when people revile you and persecute you and utter all kinds of evil against you falsely on my account. ¹²Rejoice and be glad, for your reward is great in heaven, for in the same way they persecuted the prophets who were before you. (NRSV)*

Really? Are the unworthy, the grief-ridden, the humble “blessed”? Perhaps this depends on what we think “blessed” means but, on the face of it, blessedness scarcely seems to fit those who’ve suffered tragedy, suppression, want – for those, we might say, who live in the midst of death.

Certainly, such a designation of blessedness makes no sense if the link between brokenness and blessing is conditional: “*if you are poor, then you will inherit*”. This would be to say that comfort is an *automatic* outcome of grief, and even to imply that grief or poverty might be a *means* to comfort or riches – a kind of emotional or political “technology” which delivers to us the things which we really need or want.

This is nonsense, both in our normal experience and in relation to God.

The link between the presence of death in the condition of need and its contradiction in the inheritance of all things, or comfort or a vision of the divine (etc.), is not a “natural” one. It is not the way of *nature* that those who mourn will be comforted, that those who work for peace will in fact see it, that the merciful will receive mercy. Jesus declares, rather, that this is the way of *God*.

This is to say, then, that the way of God is the overcoming of the many forms of death among us: the way of God is resurrection. The affirmations and anathemas of the Christian faith are as simple as this: we believe in a God who calls order out of chaos, creates out of nothing, brings the dead to life. It is only this which can make sense of the blessedness which Jesus announces here: the kingdom for the unworthy, the world to those powerless to claim it, righteousness for those who hunger and thirst for it.

The only question is: is this simply foolishness? Is there really any reason to step forward again after death strikes?

We do, of course, step forward most of the time, but very often simply because it is the only thing we can do if we don't want to die ourselves – a kind of defiance of death, if ultimately futile. Yet this is not the blessedness Jesus announces here. The blessed are not the stoic nor the heroic nor the courageous. The blessed are the hopeful. They step forward not because it is the only thing to do apart from dying themselves but because they deny all forms of death their apparent dominion over us.

The blessedness of the unworthy poor in spirit is that God will lift them up. The blessedness of those who mourn is that the day will yet break in their night. The blessedness of those who hunger and thirst for justice is that God will fill them.

This, of course, is not what we usually see, for God is not usually seen in these places. This is why the beatitudes might offend us; they do not seem to tell the truth. But the blessed, the hopeful, are those who, though they cannot see God coming, yet expect that he will and adjust their outlook on the world accordingly. The hopeful see God coming, as if out of nowhere.

That God might come to us in this way is, surely, foolishness and weakness on God's part. How much better if we knew where God was and how to get to him, or get him to us!

Yet St Paul writes that this is so that none may boast: what God gives is not a matter of our knowledge or power, but of God's gift. God comes – as if out of nowhere – so that we might know that it is indeed God who has come and not merely some extension of ourselves.

Blessed are they who see *more* than what is just in front of them, more than what has always been. The blessed are they who expect more than can be rightly expected.

And the blessed are they who, because of what they expect, have begun to reshape their way in the world according to God's own way: bringing justice where it is not expected, loving the mercy which reconnects, walking in the humility which opens up to all things.

By the grace of God, may we each be found so to be blessed: giving because we have received, comforting because we have been comforted, forgiving because we have been forgiven.

Amen.
