

Matthew 5:1-12

Blessed

ForeWord

Background music

The soundtrack of a movie is an essential part of the experience of watching a film, so much so that it's quite a strange experience to watch a film with the soundtrack stripped out. The experience feels empty because the soundtrack tells us how to feel about the action we see on the screen, intensifying the excitement, fear or sadness of the twists and turns of the story.

This is probably most powerfully illustrated when you watch something which has the wrong soundtrack associated with it. If you're into falling down rabbit holes in places like YouTube, you can find mock movie trailers of *Mary Poppins* which splice scenes together against a new soundtrack to recast it as a horror movie (*Scary Mary*, perhaps?), or which take *The Silence of the Lambs*, recut and re-music it into a Beauty and the Beast romance between the cannibalistic serial killer Hannibal Lecter and the young FBI investigator Clarice Starling.

The music tells us what kind of thing we're seeing. (The soundtrack is not always musical, of course; certain types of commentary voice-overs can do a similar kind of work, if perhaps usually more directed to our thinking than our feelings).

I raise all of this to propose that we are ourselves experiencing the world according to a particular soundtrack. We have known something of this now for a long time. The deep dive into the human psyche which began with Freud's depth psychology discoveries from the end of the 19th century has revealed to us how much about what we are is not obvious to us. Just as the protagonists and antagonists in a movie don't know what music is being played as the story unfolds, so also is there a kind of silent soundtrack informing how we experience the world and those around us.

Better to understand ourselves, then, the question becomes, What is the soundtrack according to which the action of our lives is being interpreted? And is it the right soundtrack? And what might it mean or feel to change the soundtrack, if that seems a good idea?

With those questions in mind, let's listen to our reading today from Matthew, from the beginning of Jesus' Sermon on the Mount: the well-known Beatitudes. And as you listen, consider the strangeness of these announced blessings – their contradiction of what is expected. For this contradiction is not unlike action observed according to the wrong soundtrack, and Jesus' announcement is the reinstatement of the right one.

Word: The Testimony of Scripture

(—> *Hearing: Matthew 5.1-12*)

Word: Proclamation

Discord

These purported blessings, the Beatitudes of Jesus, strike us as jarring, at least as statements of what is clearly the case. The poor in spirit are not very likely candidates for coming into possession of the kingdom of heaven. The meek are not very likely

candidates for inheriting the world. Mercy is risky or interpreted as weak. Purity of heart looks like foolishness in an everyone-for-themselves world. Those who hunger and thirst for righteousness are rarely satisfied or slaked. According to the soundtrack which tells us how to experience our lives in the world, those whom Jesus names here as blessed don't look as if they are living life against the background of cheery four-chord major key settings.

And so, if we are going to take them seriously, the Beatitudes require that we hear them as an alternative soundtrack, against which to observe and experience the world around us. Jesus proposes here a kind of recasting of our story like Scary Mary: same action, totally different experience: your condition is not a curse, but a blessing.

But one of the criticisms made of the Beatitudes, particularly those of Matthew when contrasted to those of Luke, is that they seem somewhat pacifist. Why does Jesus address the poor in spirit, the meek, and the hungry and thirsty, and not those who oppress them, are filled with pride, and do not share what they have with the needy?

At one level, a fair answer is that he does this elsewhere. But then we have to account for why Jesus speaks this way here.

The reason is not a comfortable one, at least at first. Jesus addresses those who are somehow "less" than the "more" of the world because the gospel does not expect very much to change in response to the ministry of Jesus. Things *might* change – people might be moved to act in ways which relieve the burdens others carry – but this might also not happen. Many people in faraway places have long suffered, sometimes for the whole of their lives, under oppressive powers and regimes within which the hope of any change in circumstance is pretty slim, and yet with Jesus' announcement of blessing in their ears. And not only in faraway places. If not quite by overbearing political or social oppression, most of us most of the time are subject to powers which diminish our humanity. These powers can be oppressive personal experiences we cannot forget, the way the colour of our skin or the gender of our bodies is read, or the political and economic forces which drive our particular world.

If we wanted to measure the impact of Jesus' inversion of values here, we'd have to admit that there is still a lot of inversion to happen, and that it won't likely happen soon. And, because of this, it's tempting to shift the location of the blessings to a distant future, beyond what we presently experience and feel.

But, then and now, Jesus speaks not to the future but to people standing around him and their immediate experience of themselves in the world. And so if Jesus does not speak in such a way to change the dynamics of what is happening around us – to change the action – he speaks to change the soundtrack: to change our experience of that action.

We don't live in a world which values poverty of spirit, which rewards those who suffer, who do not self-promote, who are not strong enough to realise justice for themselves, who sacrifice their own interests in modes of mercifulness and peacemaking.

The blessedness of incompleteness

But the strange, contradictory beatitudes of Jesus propose a different reading of our experiences. Blessing – wholeness, righteousness – is not for the proud and the self-righteous, who typically triumph. Self-satisfaction is not the measure of wholeness. Indifference to injustice is not the way to fulfilment.

Rather, Jesus calls us here to courage. He calls us to live in contradiction of the prevailing colourings and soundings which value life-denying, freedom-limiting priorities. And so, strangely, the Beatitudes are as much about incompleteness as they

are about fulfilment. Your incompleteness is a blessedness because you are seeing and feeling that the world is not ordered rightly, because you long for the whole and not the part.

The blessed are those who continue to struggle against what oppresses, what denies life, what closes off futures. Blessed are you if this is your way in the world.

And so Jesus announces this contradiction of the old soundtrack to give courage, calling us to keep at it: keep at the hunger and thirst for a broader justice, for a purer righteousness, for a true peace.

Don't give up, don't cease to struggle for life, for spirit, for freedom for all. For this is blessedness. And it is only by such blessed, incomplete ones as these – as you – that the world can know itself to be incomplete, and begin on the path to blessing and wholeness.
