

The Beatitudes according to Matthew – from the other side

Gerald O'Mahony SJ

The Sermon on the Mount may be one of the most familiar passages in the New Testament, but do we understand fully what Jesus is promising and asking of his disciples in the words of the Beatitudes? Gerald O'Mahony SJ takes a new approach to the eight blessings as he explores Matthew 5:1-12.

The Beatitudes, or The Happineses, relate in unique poetic form eight blessings that come from doing eight things. To some extent the eight blessings overlap with one another, as do the eight 'doings', as one would expect from a poem. Commentators and those who pray and ponder the wisdom of Jesus will always come up with different meanings and slants of meaning.

What I want to do is look at each of the eight blessings, the end results of doing the right things, in order to clarify what must be the right things-to-do-first in each case: 'This is the blessing ... so what does that make clear about the meaning of the action or attitude Jesus is inculcating?' For example, when Jesus says, 'Blessed are the meek, for they shall inherit the land', then the land is mine by inheritance not by conquest, which gives a meaning to the word 'meek' that otherwise has less substance.

A couple of things to note before looking at the Eight: first, the best way to understand 'the kingdom of God' or 'the kingdom of heaven' is to see it as meaning 'living in God's way', 'thinking the way God thinks', 'choosing the way God chooses'. When I do this I step out of the realm of human thinking and I breathe a different air.

Secondly, six of the Beatitudes say what will happen, whereas two of them say what is happening. The kingdom of heaven already belongs to the poor in



spirit, and also to those who are persecuted for Jesus's sake. The other six are promised for a future, which can and usually will come in this life, given time, and certainly in eternal life.

1. Blessed are the poor in spirit, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven (Matthew 5:3)

The kingdom of heaven is theirs already, so they are already looking at the world as God sees it, and their values are God's values. This Beatitude is not to do

with money, with cash, but with being poor in spiritual terms. Ultimately it means that if we recognise that any merit we seem to have is a gift from God and not something we have achieved ourselves, then we have hit upon the truth. Poverty of merit is the ideal.

There is a string of other sayings and stories of Jesus that confirm such an understanding of 'poor in spirit'. The most direct one is the story Jesus told about a Pharisee and a tax collector who went into the Temple to pray (Luke 18:9-14). The Pharisee tried to justify himself, listing all the good things he had done lately; the tax collector kept his head down and asked for mercy. Yet Jesus said it was the tax collector who went away justified. The tax collector had found the kingdom of heaven, in terms of Beatitude One.

There are other places where a similar understanding may be found: the elder brother in the story of the Prodigal Son, who was *not* poor in spirit (Luke 15:1,2,25-32); the labourers in the vineyard who

thought they should be paid by the hour (Matthew 20:1-16); Mary's Magnificat praises how God tumbles the self-righteous from their thrones and exalts the ones like herself who have nothing.

For the same reasons, Jesus wants us to keep quiet about our prayer, fasting or alms deeds, lest we begin to think of these as something we have done and may expect a reward for (Matthew 6:1-18). We should not even let our left hand know what our right hand has done (Matthew 6:3). Good deeds are to be done, of course, but then they are to be handed immediately over to God in whose power alone they were done. We should beware of the trap of deciding how much God owes us, lest we limit God's generosity, which is way beyond our merits.

2. Blessed are those who mourn, for they shall be comforted (Matthew 5:4)

What does Jesus mean, 'those who mourn'? Well, when we look at the blessing we see that he means 'those who need comforting'. In the life and sayings of Jesus, the two kinds of people he comforts are (a) sinners and (b) those who are suffering.

The sinners who are sorry for what they have done and who are mournful in consequence, these are the people Jesus came for. He did not come to call the virtuous or the self-righteous, but the sinners (Luke 5:31,32). He lays great stress on the preparations that John the Baptist made: John gave a baptism with water to those asking for forgiveness; these were the people Jesus could then work with (Mark 11:27-33), those he could convince of God's love for and offer of forgiveness to them, even though God did not like the sin. There was comfort in the fact that the sinner could shake off the lethargy and paralysis of the past and start again (Mark 2:1-12).

Suffering may come because of bad choices, malicious choices made by oneself or by other people, from wars and lesser quarrels, or they may come because of the forces of nature – illnesses, floods, tempests, earthquakes, the movements of peoples. In the face of them all Jesus tells his disciples not to be afraid (Mark 13:7). These things have nothing to do with whether God loves them or not. For those who can hear Jesus, that knowledge is already a comfort. God is my friend. If I ask for a suffering to be taken away from me and it

does not go, then either (unthinkably) God is no friend of mine, or else God is still my friend but cannot remove it there and then, as was the case with Jesus praying in the garden (Mark 14:35,36). God will answer my prayer as soon as it is possible.

The man born blind was not blind because he sinned or because his parents sinned (John 9:1-3). The tower of Siloam that fell and killed eighteen people was not God targeting those particular eighteen; it happened simply because the tower was faulty (Luke 13:1-4). Jesus himself, in the event, was not being punished for anything he did, when he ended up on a cross, that most terrible of deaths. These things happen to good people as well as bad, and I may confidently take comfort from the fact that God still loves me and knows what is going on. When Jesus was dying and when he died, his Mother and his disciples, men and women, mourned over him (Mark 15:40). But three days later he returned to them as a comforter and consoler (Luke 24:32).

The words of Julian of Norwich, that 'All shall be well, all shall be well, all manner of things shall be well' express beautifully the promise of Jesus (*Revelations of Divine Love*, Chapter 27). And if all will be well, then in some strange way everything is already alright, since we are embarked on a story that will have a happy ending.

Jesus had many words of comfort for those who are lonely or who feel insignificant. God is 'Abba' (Mark 14:36), we are all God's children with our own place at God's table (Mark 7:27) that no one can take away from us (Luke 10:42). God's love for me is unconditional, his forgiveness is unconditional (Luke 15:20). If I can love God in return in sickness or in health, in good fortune or bad, then by God's gift I am giving back unconditional love.

3. Blessed are the meek, for they shall inherit the land (Matthew 5:5)

If in the end we are to inherit the land, there is no point squabbling over it. We can afford to stay calm, even to stay 'cool' in the jargon of today.

The 'land' in question is the Promised Land: what started out as a promise of the land between Dan and Beersheba has become a promise of the kingdom of

God, a land where unconditional love and unconditional forgiveness rule, not tied to the city, not tied to the land of Judah or Israel. In fact what Jesus actually said in this Beatitude was 'they shall inherit the earth'.

When fifty or more years after Jesus the Letter to the Hebrews stated, 'You are all first-born sons' (Hebrews 12:23), the writer was saying that all his Christian readers, men, women, children, had the same privileges that would be enjoyed by a first-born son. Again, we are all equal children with our own place at God's table, and Jesus the first-born is sharing his inheritance with us.

How can we all inherit all the land? I think the clue is in the indwelling of Jesus through the Holy Spirit. Put it this way: I look out through my two eyes, and what I see is unique to me. Sitting in a circle, I have people to left and to right of me that no one else has. Put any two of us together at a table, and there is the table, there is the way I see the table, and there is the way the other person sees the table. Only I know exactly what it looks like from where I open my eyes. Only I ... and Jesus, since I can and do speak to Jesus about what I see. And about what I hear, and about what I feel, and about what I remember. No one else can take my world for themselves. They might kill me, but that would not give them access to 'the world as seen by me'.

There is one world, but we all of us share it fully. Through Jesus it is open to me to inhabit at all times his world of unconditional love and unconditional forgiveness (Luke 9:58). That enables me to be calm, or 'cool', even when a thief steals something of mine, since the whole world is mine anyway (1 Corinthians 3:18-23; Luke 15:31). For the time being it is on loan from God (Luke 16:11-12), but eventually it will be given to me to keep - that is, my vision of this world and of the kingdom (Luke 19:17).

The only people Jesus got really 'uncool' about were those who would not let love and forgiveness into their system unless under strict conditions of their own concocting (Matthew 23). If heaven is to be inherited, then any Christian might be angry about people in authority laying down conditions. We are all children (Acts 17:27,28); we all inherit.

4. Blessed are those who hunger and thirst for righteousness, for they shall be satisfied (Matthew 5:6)

What kind of people are 'the satisfied'? It turns out to mean 'people of good will'. If all they want is to do the right thing, then that will be God's gift to them. Think of the message of the angels to the shepherds (Luke 2:14), that the events in Bethlehem mean 'peace to all people of good will'. The Good News which has just arrived on earth is good news indeed for those who genuinely want to be at rights with God. On the other hand it will be bad news for those who want to set the limits on God's love and forgiveness.

We are looking at the same word which belongs in the story of the Pharisee and the tax collector at prayer in the Temple. The self-righteous Pharisee tries to justify himself, to prove his own righteousness; the tax collector who asked for forgiveness went away justified, at rights with God (Luke 18:14). I think there is a danger of confusion for us today if we translate this fourth Beatitude as 'those who hunger and thirst for justice', when it really refers to 'those who hunger and thirst for justification', namely those who long to be at rights with God. Jesus actually spent a far longer time and many, many more words advocating forgiveness that he did pursuing what we think of as justice (Mark 2:15-17). I am being told what to get right in myself, not how to put everybody else right.

That same story of the two at prayer shows how easy in the end is the search for righteousness. The Pharisee makes a great show regarding how hard he has worked to justify himself. The tax collector had to do no sums, but simply to admit that his results did not justify him, so it was up to God what happened next. The kingdom of heaven belongs to those who are invited, not to those who think they deserve it. Think too of the Good Thief on the cross beside Jesus, who wanted to be invited. He was quickly satisfied (Luke 23:43).

5. Blessed are the merciful, for they shall obtain mercy. (Matthew 5:7)

When the second half of this Fifth Beatitude is put first, it emphasises the need to want mercy. I want mercy, and this is how I must go about obtaining it. I must want universal mercy, mercy for all and not just

mercy for myself and my friends; I must want mercy not vengeance, forgiveness not revenge.

Forgiveness is the single most urgent topic in the whole of the four gospels. There are literally dozens of parables, stories, sayings and examples of the vital importance of forgiveness. The ones I shall mention here are only a sample. Many of them, like the two versions of the Lord's prayer (Matthew 6:13-14; Luke 11:4) and like our Fifth Beatitude, stress the importance of our forgiving others if we hope to be forgiven ourselves. Jesus is reported as quite content to forgive any kind of sin under the sun, except for the sin of refusing to forgive or be forgiven (Mark 3:29), which ties his hands as long as the sin persists.

After much thought and prayer over the years I have concluded that God is unconditional love and unconditional forgiveness and his forgiveness is there before we ever repent and turn back home. Nevertheless if I am refusing to forgive someone else, the joy and peace that comes of knowing myself forgiven will not be mine. Please God something better would be sorted when I die, but what a loss! I could have gone through life knowing myself forgiven for the past, for the present and for the future, but instead like a monkey hanging on to a juicy fruit through the bars of a cage, I cling to my thought of resentment or vengeance and imprison myself.

The blockbuster stories in the Gospels are nearly always about forgiveness: the Prodigal Son (Luke 15:11-24); Zacchaeus (Luke 19:1-10); the Lord's Prayer; 'Pay what you owe' (10,000 talents story – Matthew 18:23); 'Father, forgive them' (Luke 23:34); the house of Simon the Pharisee (Luke 7:44-46); the log in your own eye (Matthew 7:5); forgive 77 times a day (Matthew 18:21-22); the fruit of the vineyard (Matthew 21:41); 'Turn the other cheek' etc. (Matthew 5: 38-48); the lost sheep (Luke 15:3-7); the lost coin (Luke 15:8-10).

The stories of the talents and the pounds each have a 'third man' who buries his talent in the ground. But notice the reason: he heard the owner was stingy, he thought the owner was a hard man (Matthew 25:24). If we think God is going to come down on us for every little thing, we too will never flourish. But if we know God is forgiveness we will blossom, and do our level best. Similarly if we think God is going to

demand, 'Pay what you owe', we do not stand a chance. Either I believe in the forgiveness of sins, or I am pretty well doomed. If God expects me to forgive 77 times in the day, God himself must be at least that forgiving.

6. Blessed are the pure in heart, for they shall see God (Matthew 5:8)

If to see God is all I desire, then my heart is pure. This Beatitude is not particularly about the virtue of chastity, but more about singleness of purpose and desire. When Saint Ignatius of Loyola wrote his 'Principle and Foundation' to his Spiritual Exercises, he was spelling out what this Beatitude is about.

For Ignatius, I was created to praise, reverence and serve God, and that must come first. There are to be no conditions. Not 'I will serve God so long as I am in good health'; not 'I will serve God so long as I am reasonably wealthy'; not, 'I will serve God so long as everyone speaks well of me'. Health or sickness, money or no money, respected or despised – these are not to dictate how I praise and serve God.

God loves me with an unconditional love, and I am asked by Jesus to love God in return with no conditions. A dear friend of mine has suffered constant pain for years, since an accident suffered as a nurse thirty years ago. It dawned on her almost as a surprise that she has been loving God with no conditions ever since. It has never been a case of 'ease my pain and I will love you better'.

7. Blessed are the peacemakers, for they shall be called sons and daughters of God (Matthew 5:9)

There is a direct link between being a son or daughter of God and becoming a peacemaker. The simplest way to make the link is to say that if we are all sons and daughters of God at least by invitation, then to make war is to make war on my own nearest and dearest.

Looking at the kingdom of heaven as 'seeing in the way God sees', then every man, woman or child alive has a place at God's table and is as dear to God as the next one. If I love God, I will want above all things to keep the family together (Luke 13:34). Further, if I realise that my only eternal value lies in my being a son or daughter of God, then to be at loggerheads

with another son or daughter of God and to despise them amounts to saying I myself am despicable. Either we are both divine children, or neither of us is. I cannot believe one thing and act on another.

It is a pity that our liturgical prayers usually restrict 'our brothers and sisters' to those who have been baptised in the same denomination of Christianity. The cause of peacemaking would be better served if we were able to talk more readily of every other human being as being my brother or sister.

The image I have found most helpful and central is to make a gospel contemplation on the baptism of Jesus as if I had been a companion from Nazareth who went with him to be baptised. Jesus is baptised, the heavens are split open, the Spirit comes down like a dove (Noah's dove), and the voice from heaven says, 'You are my beloved Son; with you I am well pleased' (or, 'my favour rests on you'). Then Jesus comes out of the water and says to me, 'You next!' I go into the water and picture the same thing happening to me: the heavens split open, I see the dove and I hear, 'You are my beloved son (daughter); my favour rests on you.'

When that invitation is known to be open to the whole wide world, it is hard to make enemies.

8. Blessed are those who are persecuted for righteousness' sake, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven (Matthew 5:10)

The implication here seems to be, that anyone who lives in God's way, thinking the way God thinks, choosing what God prefers, will automatically be persecuted. It is impossible to have one without the other.

This was a difficult one for Jesus's disciples and his apostles to take on board. There is a certain triumph in the voice of Peter as he comes to see Jesus as the

Christ, the Son of the living God; but almost in the next breath he is protesting at the very notion that the Christ will have to suffer. The disciples had to learn the meaning of the Servant Songs in Isaiah, the meaning of Psalm 22, the meaning of the sufferings of all previous prophets. When Jesus appeared to them in the Resurrection, all became clear: earth was bound to react badly when heaven appeared in its midst; they should not have been surprised.

So it was that when Peter and John were arrested and punished for preaching and teaching about the risen Jesus, they actually rejoiced, and the infant Church rejoiced with them, thanking God for the privilege of being able to suffer for Christ and for the gospel (Acts 4:23-21; 5:41).

St Peter in his First Letter has the wise caution: no special glory if we are punished for something we did wrong (1Peter 3:17). The glory belongs to doing the right thing and still being persecuted for it.

And so when we read or hear the familiar words of the Beatitudes but look at them in a new way, with the blessing foremost in our mind, then we have an even clearer vision of what Jesus is asking of us:

- let go of merits;
- trust God in times of sorrow;
- sit lightly to possessions;
- keep on trying to be good;
- don't judge anybody;
- love God in return with all your heart;
- take pride in being God's son or daughter;
- take persecution in your stride.

Gerald O'Mahony SJ is a retreat-giver at Loyola Hall Jesuit Spirituality Centre, Rainhill. He is the author of many books, including A Way in to the Trinity (2004).