



Beatitudes on Film: Blessed are the poor in spirit, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven

We've got a golden ticket

Christine Allen

In a new series, we will be exploring the Beatitudes through the medium of children's films. We've chosen eight films – from classics to recent award-winners – through which school-age children can gain a better understanding of each of the eight blessings imparted by Jesus in Matthew's Gospel. In this first article, we take a trip with Charlie and his golden ticket around Willy Wonka's chocolate factory in the hope of finding the kingdom promised to those who are poor in spirit.

A poor child, entranced by the charismatic owner of a chocolate factory, gets a life-changing opportunity in the form of a golden ticket, an opportunity he shares with four other children whose lives are also changed rather differently! The well-known story of *Charlie and the Chocolate Factory* – whether you discover it on screen, stage or in the pages of Roald Dahl's book – offers us many characters with whom to identify and therefore speaks to us on a number of levels. It takes us on a journey of strong moral reflection as, once inside the factory, we get caught up in various escapades and encounter temptations.

How can this story help us to put in context the first of the Beatitudes that Jesus proclaims in Matthew's Gospel: 'Blessed are the poor in spirit, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven'? It's a complex Beatitude – not that the others are simple, but it is more obvious to whom they are referring. It takes a bit of reflection to understand what being 'poor in spirit' means. To our modern ears, it sounds like an allusion to weakness, something which we are generally encouraged to avoid. However, that is precisely what Jesus is getting at: he wants to change our mindset. We can't kid ourselves that we are in control of everything. I don't fully subscribe to the idea that God has 'a plan' for us,



Willy Wonka and the Chocolate Factory
(Warner Bros, 1971)

which ignores our free will. But I do think that God has dreams and hopes for me and has given me enormous potential, and it's my choice as to how I use it ... and this film gives us a way to think about that idea.

Being poor in spirit

Most commentators talk about being poor in spirit as meaning that we rely totally on God. There are few of us who can do this. We might look at those in

religious life as the best example of people who have the freedom to dedicate their lives totally to God, but to most of us such total, physical dependence is not only a huge challenge, but it actually feels inappropriate or negligent! When we have families to support, bills to pay, how can we afford to be totally dependent on God in this physical or practical way?

Likewise, total dedication at the emotional or mental level is a challenge – here are those families and other relationships again, wanting a piece of us. I know I embrace the opportunities of Lent, for example, or use [Pray as you go](#) to ensure that I have time for reflection, because otherwise it's hard to carve out enough space for God in my busy life, let alone *dedicate* myself to Him! However, we shouldn't forget that we are called to live out our relationship with God *through*

our relationships with others. Children especially have an opportunity to understand this dimension of dependence – by and large they are reliant on others to provide and care for them, so they might have a unique insight into how these relationships of dependence can be spaces for us to meet Christ in others, and for others to meet Christ in us.

Charlie's family in the film can help us to think about this kind of dependence; they have such a capacity for sharing, and the bonds between Charlie and his grandparents, in particular, are strong. He is as willing to sacrifice things for his grandparents as they are for him. They are reliant on one another because they have very little, but their mutual dependence is a catalyst for love and generosity – they find joy in their relationships, even if they don't know where their next meal is coming from.

Perhaps it is true that those in material poverty – like Charlie's family and the far too many people in our world who are denied the basics of life – show a stronger sense of being 'poor in spirit': they exhibit that total dependence on God because they have very little else to rely on. Imagine having nothing, imagine that whether you eat or not in a day depends on whether someone else helps you. When Jesus talks about those who are poor in spirit, I think he means (but not exclusively) those who are materially poor and who rely on others. When he gave us the Beatitudes, those without assets – land, jobs (many of which were temporary) or families to support them – were totally destitute. There was no welfare state in Jesus's time and most people lived a subsistence life – labouring, farming, shepherding, etc. All the stories and parables we hear about workers in the bible give us an insight into the precarious nature of the economy at the time. The Old Testament prophets cried out against the treatment of widows and orphans because they were at the bottom of the pile, totally and utterly reliant upon the goodwill and charity of others. How the poor and vulnerable are treated is, and always has been, a sign of the kind of society in which one lives, and so no doubt Jesus was at least partly addressing the plight of the poor.

We have to avoid romanticising this, though. Poverty is an abuse of people and a sin against God because it degrades and diminishes human beings. There is nothing to celebrate in the suffering that poverty brings.

If you are rich (like most of us in the 'rich North' are), it is easy to forget how dependent – or interdependent – we are on one another: our wealth comes at others' expense and our lifestyles impact significantly on the planet. No promise of reward excuses poverty.

I think that Jesus is also speaking in this Beatitude to people who have had their 'spirit' ground down – people who, through illness (physical or mental), disability or perhaps something like long-term unemployment, have lost their sense of worth. Imagine having no energy for everyday life, everything seems an uphill battle. I am sure that most of us have days like that, but for it to be a permanent state of affairs must be tough. That, too, is a denigration of the fundamental dignity of all human being, a dignity that God wants to be alive and flourishing in all.

Grandpa Joe, having been bed-ridden for 20 years, might be one who is poor in spirit in this way. He isn't, as some might say, lazy: this is a man who isn't able to face the world, who is totally dependent on Charlie's parents to look after him. Yet, look how even the hope of finding the golden ticket seems to offer such energy – he is so inspired that he gives up some of his tobacco money to buy a chocolate bar for Charlie. It is heart-warming to see the difference that even a small glimmer of hope can make to someone who is struggling to make sense of life, a glimmer that many of us would miss if we were too caught up in life's distractions. What sort of things might give us so much hope and how can we be more attentive to them?

When we get to the factory, we find out more about the other children who have a golden ticket: they are examples of those who are definitely not poor in spirit; indeed they seem to represent various vices – [greed](#), [envy](#), [pride](#) – and all come to a sticky end (quite literally, in most cases!). In contrast to them is Charlie, a poor boy with an obvious 'good heart' whose golden ticket came to him by good fortune.

The factory of life

Or did it? One of the interesting things in the story is that it feels as if its events were somehow predestined, maybe even planned by Willy Wonka. The golden ticket – a gift, a grace perhaps – seems initially to be given without rhyme or reason, but when you see the arc of the whole story, one begins to suspect that

there might be a reason after all. The fact that Charlie and his family are so poor is an integral part of the story; it enables us to have a sense that Willy Wonka's actions were the right thing to do. But again, it is important not to romanticise their poverty; their eventual good fortune is not gratuitously handed to them on a silver platter because of their situation: Charlie earns it. He is given the opportunity to prove himself worthy of the prize. So this story isn't a warrant for imprudence, nor does it glamourise poverty.

Each of the different rooms in the factory is not merely a showcase of an exciting new product, it also represents a test. Those who fall foul are those who don't obey the rules, or who selfishly demand to be the centre of things, or who want to upset the careful ecosystem of the factory. The oompa-loompas are on hand to sing the moral of the story when each disobedient child meets their fate in the factory, but in our own lives we must reflect on our actions ourselves: how do we respond to the tests of *our* lives?

Having made his way successfully through the various tests of the factory, and the final test where even Grandpa Joe finds the nerve to give Willy Wonka a telling off, Charlie's decision not to take the everlasting gobstopper seems to be the tipping point in his earning his reward. Most of us might have been angry and taken our 'just desserts', having been so badly treated, but Charlie is able to leave it behind. It's a generosity, a renouncing of greed that I would struggle with!

Inheriting the Kingdom

There aren't enough words in this article – or articles under the sun! – to explore fully what 'the kingdom of heaven' really is, but in the gospels Jesus gives us glimpses of what it is. In this story it is a reward beyond the wildest dreams of a little boy, not because it means a lifetime's supply of confectionary (surely a lot of people's idea of heaven!) but because it is a way out of poverty for his whole family; it is, just as it is in the gospels, a means to a life where all can flourish. They won't have to worry again. They will have work and income. It's a gift on so many levels.

And in fact it is a two-way gift. Willy Wonka has no family, and he sees in Charlie's relationship with his family a love that he has never had. His gift of the factory to Charlie also gives Wonka an opportunity to pass his 'kingdom' on to someone who will love it and cherish it just as he has. Perhaps that is what the kingdom is like for God: when we contribute to the building of the kingdom, when we make a difference in the world, when we show what it means to be good, when we love one another and show what it means to be really human – in the way that Jesus showed us – we give glory and joy to God.

Charlie and his family receive two wonderful gifts in this story: the factory, yes, in that final 'kingdom' moment; but they also get the golden ticket. That ticket is a sign of hope and opportunity that makes Grandpa Joe dance round the room! I think the golden ticket could represent our faith: we are aware that we have been given an 'entry' to the factory of life in which God gives us many gifts which we must use well. What sort of gifts has God given us? And are we using them?

In this factory of life, we will face a range of different challenges, like the children who have the golden ticket. The Beatitudes help us see what is needed in order to meet these challenges and to contribute to the kingdom of heaven. But the first thing we need, as this first Beatitude tells us, is a desire to put oneself to one side; to think not of ourselves first, but of God and others. For it is in serving God and others that we discover what it means to be fully human and to see the full joys of the kingdom. Just as Charlie was wide-eyed in amazement when he entered the factory, God's love inspires awe in us. Only by being poor in spirit and open to receiving the delights we are offered, as Charlie was – not by trying to take more, like the other children; or trying to make sense of it all against conventional wisdom, like their parents – can we truly believe and take our place in the kingdom.

We may at times struggle to be 'poor in spirit', or even to know what it means, but that's the journey we are on, and we can trust that we will taste and see the kingdom of heaven if we try our hardest to meet the challenges in the factory of life. Here's hoping there is a very big scumdidlyumptious feast at the end.....

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