

Listening on the Mountain

Micah 6:1-8; Matthew 5:1-12

In a nursing home last week a wonderful thing happened. I had read the passage about blessings from Matthew's gospel and asked if any one in the room remembered a song from Sunday School about blessing. One old lady who I since learned hardly ever spoke, started off:

Count your blessings, name them one by one,

Count your blessings, see what God hath done!

Count your blessings, name them one by one,

And it will surprise you what the Lord hath done.

It was a blessing to me and to those who heard it. Whatever life had thrown at that lady; whatever her health concerns, or family concerns; whether or not she was fully in the room or not, something triggered off that Sunday School song in her memory, and she sang. She sang about blessings, and she counted them, and she added to ours.

A couple of years ago I led a pilgrimage to the Holy Land. There is a Convent dedicated to the Beatitudes, the blessings, and just along from it, near the Church of the Loaves and the Fishes, there is a little sheltered area and an outside communion table where we shared the bread and the wine, with the Sea of Galilee and the Mount of the Beatitudes as a backdrop. That was a blessing too.

Whether Jesus preached one long sermon, or whether Matthew in his gospel has edited together several sayings of Jesus, the fact that Matthew sets the scene on a mountain taps into the powerful imagery of the Bible. Mountains, high places, are where God's people meet with God. Moses on Mount Sinai, Elijah on Mount Horeb. The Temple in Jerusalem is built on Mount Zion. This is no ordinary sermon. The words recorded tower above us like a great rock of history. In the C20th both Gandhi and Martin Luther King bore witness to the place of the Sermon in shaping their thought and action.¹

“Blessed”, says Jesus. “To be blessed is not simply to be happy, but to know that one is included in the coming realm.”ⁱⁱⁱ To be blessed is to hear the promises of God to us, in the brightness and in the darkness of life, and to know that we are not forgotten. To be blessed in these words of Jesus means taking the open, honest look at life and finding, even in its bleaker moments, that God is right there beside us, caring, loving, understanding, including, welcoming. To be blessed is more than some fairy-tale promise that everything is going to be all right, and with the superstitious flick of a wand safety and protection will come and never be threatened or violated. Blessing, for Jesus, is the assurance that, while life may be difficult now, those who hold on to the values of faith and hope and love will find that despite the present darkness, the Kingdom of Light will still shine. Blessing gives us security, not immunity. In the inside out, upside down world that Jesus often talks about, we are challenged to find that the promise of hope is often at its most real when circumstances of life are at their most bleak. Blessing is what keeps us going on. We see the world as it really is, and we notice in the darker times those pinpricks of light that will be the kindness of friends, the support of strangers, the encouragement of family, the steadiness of God’s unwavering presence.

At different services I say words of blessing. Not a magic charm but strength for the road; not pie-in-the-sky-when-you-die, but something that is resilient and supple enough to help you, and me, get through, and keep on.

The difficulties of our world today, much of which seems to emanate from the United States and President Trump, make many of us not only queasy but frightened. When the most powerful man in the world insists on building walls, condones torture, dismantles a fragile health system which will make more vulnerable those already vulnerable, threaten the rights of minorities, and deny climate change, amongst the many other things being promised, many feel un-blessed. The American film-maker Woody Allen once said, “More than at any time in history, mankind faces a crossroad. One path leads to despair and utter hopelessness, the other to total extinction. Let us pray that we have the wisdom to choose correctly.” Wry jokes like that are

good because they are unserious ways of saying serious things. What we can laugh at, we can face. What we cannot laugh at, we often deny.ⁱⁱⁱ

Jonathan Sacks, the former Chief Rabbi sees in the last fifty years the dominance of two immensely powerful institutions: the state and the market. Between them they were thought to be able of solving most human problems. But either singly or together, they don't appear to have brought consistent blessing. Blessing is about what we have; the market concentrates on what we do not have. Blessing is about the good we do; the state is about the good we pay others to do. A world in which there are only states and markets might be efficient. It would also be a world largely without blessing. Government and markets may be means, but they are not, in themselves, ends. For that we need individuals wired into communities working together so that blessing may come and may be sustained.

The purpose of the Sermon on the Mount delivered by Jesus to a listening people was to help recognise blessing when things were going well and when things were going badly. Jesus was not offering spiritual Prozac to tranquillise the pain. Jesus was offering steadiness to enable people to put two feet on the ground and face the world as it is. Jesus alerts us to the power of God working within the human spirit to defeat tragedy and pain and injustice and cruelty by celebrating life in the midst of suffering. That is blessing. That is the blessing we need to hear in the history of our world today as it continues to unfold. That is the blessing we need to experience in our own lives, in their tapestries of bright and dark threads.

A story is told from World War Two when Jews were herded into the concentration camp at Auschwitz. Some accused the God of the Covenant, the God of blessing, for abandoning His people and leaving them to suffer. They decided to put God on trial. Charge after charge was laid at the door of God, and when the verdict came in God was pronounced guilty. There was silence. Then an old man got up and said, "And now it is time for our evening prayers." And they prayed. In the darkness of anger, grief, fear, hurt, misery, despair, in the face of death, they prayed. And who is to say that it did not help and comfort and sustain?

Listening **to** God and **for** God on the Mountain, we hear in the words of Jesus the God Who blesses the poor in spirit; Who blesses the mourning; Who blesses the meek; Who blesses those hungering and thirsting for righteousness; Who blesses the merciful; Who blesses the pure in heart; Who blesses the peacemakers; Who blesses the persecuted and downtrodden.

“God’s appearance changes. Blessed are those who can recognise Him in any disguise”, says an old proverb. I think in this teaching of blessing from the mountain, Jesus invites us to live in the spirit of the Beatitudes, to live in the spirit of blessing.

Jesus invites to live in simplicity. Not to lack sophistication, but to hear God still speaking to us today in these pointed words of Jesus.

We are blessed in this life when we demonstrate humility, bring a peaceful presence, open our hearts to others, and show mercy to those who cry out for it.

We are blessed in this life if we live in hopefulness. Not in anger or in cynicism, but clear in the belief that mercy, humility, peace and love are the descriptions of what it means to live. We are blessed in this life if we live compassionately. Compassion is not pity or sympathy; it goes deeper. Compassion is not simply feeling sorry for someone, or even simply understanding their experience. Compassion requires not simply walking the same path with a companion, but walking in his or her shoes.^{iv}

Listening on the Mountain the blessings of Jesus shake the foundations of our world. They remain a radical call to a new way of life, a new way of both attitude and action. Hear Christ’s voice when He says to you today, “Blessed are you when...”^v

In the Name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit.

Amen

ⁱ Leith Fisher, ‘But I say to you. Exploring the Gospel of Matthew’, p46

ⁱⁱ Ronald J Allen, ‘Feasting on the Word’, Year A Vol 1 p309

ⁱⁱⁱ Jonathan Sacks, ‘Celebrating Life. Finding happiness in unexpected places’, p1

^{iv} Charles James Cook, Feasting on the Word’, Year A Vol 1 pps 310-312

^v Fisher, pps 62-63