

Matthew 5:1-12^{vi}

When Jesus saw the crowds, he went up the mountain; and after he sat down, his disciples came to him.

Then he began to speak, and taught them, saying: "Blessed are the poor in spirit, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven.

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

Blessed are the meek, for they will inherit the earth.

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

Blessed are the merciful, for they will receive mercy.

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

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

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

Blessed are you when people revile you and persecute you and utter all kinds of evil against you falsely on my account.

Rejoice and be glad, for your reward is great in heaven, for in the same way they persecuted the prophets who were before you."

^v About the Gospel: Matthew 5:1-12

Matthew gathers the teaching of Jesus into five great discourses and balances them with narratives of Jesus' deeds. Today's reading is the first of a series drawn from the first discourse, the Sermon on the Mount.

The "blessed" in the Old Testament are those who receive an earthly fulfillment—of prosperity, offspring and long life. In later Jewish writing, the blessings belong to those who will enter the final age of salvation. Jesus offers these future blessings now, for the kingdom is present in him.

The first four beatitudes reflect attitudes that climax with an unceasing hunger for a right relationship with God—both personally and communally. The second four reflect the actions and lifestyles of those who hunger in this way. In verse 10, Jesus teaches that those who live the Beatitudes will face persecution, for this way is contrary to all that the world espouses.

vi Reflection and Response

While the words of the Beatitudes waft over us with loveliness each time we hear them, we may need a new perspective to fully appreciate them. What if we were actually experiencing oppression, hunger and thirst, or deep sorrow? How would the words sound to us then?

Jesus spoke these words to a crowd of peasants, a tattered bunch, probably not even knowing what they were searching for. They lacked an understanding of their plight. Jesus offered them another view of their aching unhappiness, a hidden dimension beyond their misery.

Jesus assured them that they were holy. He corrected the misconception that salvation must be earned and that earthly prosperity was a sign of divine favor. He reversed "top down" notions of religion, where sanctity filtered from the religious hierarchy to the common folk. He praised the kind of ordinary sanctity that Salvadoran theologian Jon Sobrino called, "in the God of the lowly, the greater God."

Those whom the world would consider miserable are in Jesus' eyes most happy. They have seen through the false promises of wealth and the fragility of human relationships. Knowing that all illusions must fail, they seek security in God. Those who mourn are blessed for several reasons: because they have loved deeply, and because God will comfort them.

Mourners may also achieve greatness of heart. From one of the Madres of Chile, demonstrating against an oppressive government on behalf of their "disappeared" children comes this rare expression of broad empathy: "If we find one disappeared one I will rejoice as much as if they had found mine."

If we compare that attitude with the competitiveness one hears from North American parents describing the athletic or academic abilities of their offspring, then we may begin to understand what Jesus means by blessed. We will always be in for a surprise when we put Jesus' Beatitudes into action.