

Common Dreams 3, Canberra, 2013 Workshop

**‘Who can be a Midwife for Positive Change?
The Answer is in the Beatitudes’.
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I will introduce the subject: “Who can be a ‘Midwife for Positive Change? The answer is in the Beatitudes.” After that, you will have the opportunity to work individually, and to discuss together some questions I’ll give you.

During my presentation on Friday I talked about the teachings of Jesus compiled under the heading ‘The Sermon on the Mount’. These are generally agreed as most likely to be teaching from the historical Jesus. Matthew has compiled them in his own order, but we can safely assume that he received them either in some written form, or in an oral form. They are short sayings or short scenarios which contain short sayings. Of course we don’t imagine for one moment that Jesus stood up (on a mountain somewhere) and read out the teachings, one after another, until the end. They are most likely to have been repeated individually by Jesus a sufficient number of times and in a sufficient number of settings, so that they became strongly associated with him. They were remembered and passed on by people who followed him.

Even though some fifty years had passed from Jesus’ death until Matthew’s gospel was written, there is no problem in imagining that the teachings were passed on orally, and with great accuracy. Accuracy was a characteristic of oral traditions thought to be of great importance.

Sometimes scholars call the Sermon on the Mount the first of five ‘discourses’ in Matthew’s gospel. The Sermon on the Mount is known as the ‘Discourse on Ethics’. It is certainly that. It includes the 9 Beatitudes plus another 24 more distinct teachings. The ethics in the Sermon on the Mount are fundamental ethical principles. They are summed up in the enigmatic, cryptic sayings that Matthew placed at the sermon’s beginning: the Beatitudes.

The Beatitudes also point to personal qualities that relate to each of these ethics. They are expanded on, illustrated and commented on, in the other teachings in the Sermon on the Mount, and in Jesus’ parables which relate to the Beatitudes. They include the subjects of:

Encouraging other people.

Creating order out of disorder.
Combating injustice.
Undertaking non-violent resistance to violence.
Seeing other people in a positive light,
Receiving spiritual nourishment for the task.

They address tricky questions like:
Divorce.
How to regard old religious traditions.
What ought to be the attitude to money.
How to tell if you really are following Jesus' teachings.
What kinds of things is it OK to pray for.
What happens if you really do carry out the teachings?

Before I set you to work on a task related to the Beatitudes, I'm going to list four of the teachings from the Sermon on the Mount, with the outcomes that might be expected from following them. I will also list the problems they might create for the status quo. Two are Beatitudes, the others are not.

1. Jesus said, "The meek (or the humble-minded) will inherit the earth".

The Expected Outcome: That rulers will be servants of the people, putting the people's needs ahead of their own.

The Problem for the Status Quo: That human societies have always granted privilege to those who lead them. Emperors and kings, tribal chiefs, presidents and prime ministers, have all stood at the top of the food chain. They have supported hierarchical systems which enable them to withhold resources or privilege from people further down the hierarchy. In that way the power of the ruler over the ruled is perpetuated.

Unfortunately this also applied to the power of church hierarchies, once Christianity became the religion of Rome. And even today, the lower that Christians stand in the church hierarchy, the more the 'princes' of the church are able to wield religious power over them.

2. Jesus said: "Love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you."

The Expected Outcome: That those who rule will respond to aggressive behaviour by just means, without violence, ruling out the potential and tendency for warfare.

The Problem for the Status Quo: That Christian nations have not put into practice Jesus' teachings about non-violence. America's reaction to 9/11 is an example of a response to violence with violence. This knee-jerk 'normal' reaction from a 'Christian' president ruled out the idea of bringing those responsible to justice, while avoiding the deaths and disablement and misery of hundreds of thousands of people who were totally uninvolved in 9/11.

3. Jesus said: “Fortunate (or blessed) are the merciful, for they will receive mercy”.

The Expected Outcome: That the weak or powerless or hungry or uneducated or ill will be treated with compassion, and that their needs will be fulfilled.

The Problem for the Status Quo: that economic and political systems in the 21st century provide for exorbitant profit-making on the part of those who control those systems. They preserve an ideology of the 'deserving' rich (we worked hard for it) and the 'undeserving' poor, who have not 'earned' the same rewards for their hard labour. This non-compassionate approach to the poor as undeserving, results in an unbalanced distribution of medical, housing and educational resources.

4. Jesus said: “Do not judge, so that you may not be judged.”

The Expected Outcome: that no religious, ideological or racial group will be seen as inferior to any other. Community harmony will result, on the basis of inclusiveness.

The Problem for the Status Quo: that church and politics have always been corrupted by prejudice. Most rulers have favoured the requests of people who agree with their particular brand of politics or theology.

One of the most violent and ugly forms of prejudice has often infected the church. It is called sectarianism. Even today, each section of the church tends to regard its particular approach to the faith as correct, which means all the rest are wrong.

Throughout church history, the basis for 'winning the world for Christ' was not just that the 'heathen' might go to hell. It was not so much compassion for those who had not heard the gospel, but contempt for the other faiths to which most of those people belonged. We are right, so they must be wrong! As we know too

well, the most murderous outcome of that prejudice has been committed against people of the Jewish faith.

You will probably have noticed connections between the Beatitudes in that list, and the two other teachings. As I said, the principles in the Sermon on the Mount are fundamental ethical axioms for life. If they and their related qualities are adopted and internalised and acted on, two things can happen.

1. They can first of all transform a human being into the best person he or she can be. That's the first step.
2. Secondly, human transformation in accordance with those ethical principles could then be the catalyst for creating the best possible world.

In short, each Beatitude describes a characteristic of persons who are equipped to create the 'kingdom of heaven' on earth.

I'm going to go through those characteristics now, with a short description of each of them.

First comes the biblical Beatitude.

Second (in red) is my interpretation of it, based on Jesus' language, Aramaic.

Third (in bold) is the personal characteristic that Beatitude points to.

1. *Blessed are the poor in spirit, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven.*

Fortunate are the humble-minded; they will live in the best possible world.

The Aramaic word Jesus would have used for 'poor' is anavim. Anavim is typical of Aramaic and Hebrew words in that it has several possible meanings. It can mean 'poor' as in 'impoverished'. It can mean 'poor' as the 'oppressed'. It can also mean 'poor' as in 'humble'. In accordance with Jesus' other teachings about the 'last being first', 'humble' is the meaning that makes most sense to me.

Personal characteristic: The ability to be humble in mind (or spirit).

This is the characteristic of someone who is not hung up on his or her own importance. He or she has no need to feel superior to anyone else, or to claim material goods or other privileges that are not available to everyone. Because of that, the humble-minded person is not a wimp, but is immensely strong. He or she is equipped to establish equal respect for the rights and humanity of all people.

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

Fortunate are those who mourn; they will face the future with strength. (Which is another way of saying, they will be comforted).

When the Israelites were in mourning for their lost homeland, lost family members, the prophets Isaiah and Jeremiah said: “Comfort! There is hope for your future. Even the English word ‘comfort’ has the root meaning of ‘with strength’.

Personal characteristic: the ability to overcome adversity.

The person with this characteristic knows what it is to lose people or things very important and dear, but has the hope and the strength to see and create a new future. For Jesus’ oppressed and tyrannised people, this was an essential attribute if they were to look forward, rather than backward. Jesus gave them that hope and strength as they followed him to become a part of building the Kingdom of heaven on earth. That still applies in the 21st century, in individual lives, and in the challenges of the church and the wider society.

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

Fortunate are the non-violent; they will govern the earth.

The English word ‘Meek’ is an unfortunate description of these people. It conjures up the image of a ‘door-mat’, a spineless wimp. I looked up several dictionaries trying to find an appropriate meaning for ‘meek’. There were meanings like ‘submissive’, yielding, gentle. None came close to the meaning in Jesus’ language until I consulted the Macquarie Dictionary. It said meek meant ‘humbly patient under provocation from others’. You will remember that word in Aramaic – anavim, which can mean ‘poor’, ‘oppressed’ or ‘humble’. Here is another version of the word – this time the ‘humble’ oppressed (or meek) who will inherit the earth are those who are humbly patient under provocation from others. In other words, they are non-violent.

Personal characteristic: the ability to resist oppression non-violently.

This is the core of Jesus’ vision of the Kingdom of heaven. This is the characteristic of people who have seen at first-hand the destruction and futility of violence. In the first century under the Romans, this kind of devastating outcome to armed resistance was all around. Jesus saw that in his lifetime and found a way to resist violent and heartless power without resorting to more violence. As

the Macquarie Dictionary says, ‘meek’ means ‘humbly patient under provocation from others’.

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

Fortunate are those whose passion is for justice; they will receive justice.

This characteristic is sometimes called ‘righteousness’ in scripture. In scripture, the Hebrew word means justice for the oppressed.

Personal characteristic; the ability to bring justice to the disadvantaged.

It is an essential quality of people who will need to ‘repair’ the unjust structures of society and eliminate the gap between the ‘haves’ and ‘have nots’.

5. *Blessed are the merciful, for they will receive mercy.*

Fortunate are the compassionate; they will receive compassion.

This looks like the capacity to forgive. But the word in Matthew’s Greek (*elehmenos*) describes someone who does a kind deed. The word Jesus is most likely to have used is the Aramaic word *rakham*, which means loving kindness, or compassion.

Personal characteristic; the ability to empathise with others in need.

Justice without compassion can be ‘as cold as charity’.

Compassion includes empathy – feeling others’ pain, or sadness, or need. A psychopath is someone totally lacking in empathy. S Beatitudes 4 and 5 are clearly linked. Justice and compassion are essential partners in repairing the world.

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

Fortunate are the undivided in heart; they will commit to the way of Jesus.

This is someone whose heart is not corrupted by competing inclinations. The word Jesus would have used in Aramaic means ‘pristine and unadulterated’, or ‘clear, bright and clean’.

Personal characteristic; the ability to make and keep a commitment.

To hang in there and make a difference for the good requires undivided commitment. Only those not afraid of dedicating themselves to the best kind of world will be able to ring in the changes.

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

Fortunate are the peacemakers; they will forgive and reconcile humanity.

This looks like people stepping in between combatants, and helping them make peace. It may be that, but on a personal basis it is about me making peace with someone who has offended against me. To do that, I must forgive the other person for an offence committed in the past, or the reason for conflict will arise again.

Jesus would have had in mind people who create Shalom. That does not just mean the absence of conflict. Shalom means the kind of lasting peace which brings health and wholeness to mind, body and soul.

Personal characteristic; the ability to forgive the past.

Peace without forgiveness is usually fleeting, and leads to more conflict; more violence. The forgiving person can heal the wounds of the past and open the way to lasting peace.

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

Fortunate are those in danger for living Jesus' way; they will be freed from fear to follow him.

How have so many risked punishment and death to follow Jesus? Perhaps it is because in practising his teaching they have discovered that it is the ultimate guide to realising their full human potential. They knew they were on Jesus' side and that freed them from fear.

Personal characteristic; the ability to overcome fear.

Changing the social order usually means confrontation with authority. The person whose commitment to the best kind of world has overcome their fear can persevere in the face of persecution.

As I said in my presentation on Friday, following these teachings of Jesus has often been regarded as too hard, and not even attempted. Yet no one, especially Jesus, would have expected his followers to adopt and carry out all of them at once. It would have been a gradual process, as they learned from him.

Let me illustrate that with a story. It seems that a man approached a Jewish Rabbi, enquiring about the requirements for converting to Judaism. The Rabbi told him that it involved following the

commandments in the Hebrew Bible. He said that there are 613 of them. “What!” said the would-be convert, “I couldn’t possibly learn them all, let alone carry them out.” “Oh no,” said the Rabbi. “You don’t do it like that. Just pick ONE, and get started.” The assumption is that each commandment is linked to the next, and the next, and so on.

I would say the same thing about the teachings of Jesus. Just pick one, and get started. When you do, you will discover that no matter which one you pick, it will lead you to all of the others.

THE TASK.

- 1. Individually, using your handout, choose ONE of the personal characteristics inherent in the Beatitudes and think about making it your own characteristic. Imagine ways you might put it into practice. (5 mins)**
- 2. Working with two or three of your neighbours, decide which of the ethical principles could easily be linked with your chosen one? (5 mins)**
- 3. Would you regard someone who had adopted and put into practice all of the ethics in the Beatitudes as reaching his or her ultimate human potential?’ (5 mins)**

DISCUSSION AND QUESTIONS.

TO END:

Can you imagine a creed for Jesus’ followers that goes like this?

All: I believe in Jesus’ vision of the best possible world, made known to us in his teaching.

L: Jesus said:

Fortunate are the humble-minded;

P: they will live in the best possible world.

L: Fortunate are the mournful;

P: they will face the future with strength.

L: Fortunate are the non-violent;

P: they will govern the earth.

L: Fortunate are those whose passion is for justice;

P: they will receive justice.

L: Fortunate are the compassionate;

P: they will receive compassion.

L: Fortunate are the undivided in heart;

P: they will commit to the way of Jesus.

L: Fortunate are the peacemakers;

P: they will forgive and reconcile humanity.

L: Fortunate are those in danger for living Jesus' way;

P: they will be freed from fear to follow him.

**All: I believe that those who follow Jesus
will create the best possible world.**

**I invite any of you who feel inclined, to say this Jesus creed
with me.**

Finally, the 'take home' thought is that Jesus gave these teachings to his followers (including us!) because he believed they/we could follow them. That means he believed in a God who believes in us! This is not a God who believes we are all born evil and need redemption through the 'death of Christ'.

Jesus' teachings tell us that God believes we can create the best possible world.

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