

## **“The Beatitudes: Seeing the World Right Side Up”**

Date: 2 February 2020

Text: Matthew 4:23 – 5:12

Rev. Peter Coutts

A few years ago there was a pilot practicing high-speed maneuvers in a jet fighter. She turned her controls for what she thought was a steep climb... and plunged straight into the earth. She wasn't aware that she had been flying upside down. Christian writer and philosopher Dallas Willard calls this story “a parable of human existence in our times – not exactly that everyone is crashing, though there is enough of that – but most of us as individuals, and world society as a whole, live at high-speed, and often with no clue to whether we are flying upside down or right-side up. Indeed, we are haunted by a strong suspicion that there may be no difference – or at least that the difference is unknown or irrelevant”. How do we look at the world? How should we live in the world? When it comes down to our personal core philosophy (or theology), we all have answers to these questions. We all have a perspective on how the world is and how it works.

The Sermon on the Mount was Jesus' declaration of how the world really is. He was describing the world right-side-up to a people who were seeing it upside down. He said, the Kingdom of God is here and this is what it looks like. A kingdom without political structures or national borders. It is a kingdom that is defined by “the good works” (as Jesus put it) of its citizens: the brothers and sisters of Christ. As we choose to live in the ways of this kingdom – the way of life that these famous lines are illustrations of – then we become a light to the world. As we let this light shine before others through our good works, through those good works we give glory to God who is the head of this Kingdom. And to the world around us we prove that this kingdom is real. This is the core message of the Sermon on the Mount, that has become the core message of the missional church. Jesus wrapped up this amazing day of teaching telling the listeners to get on with it. He said, “everyone then who hears these words of mine and acts on them will be like a wise people who build their houses on rock”. Notice what he is asking us to do: hear and then act. But to know how to live rightly Jesus said you first need to see how life is...how life should be... from God's point of view.

We hear in Matthew about the baptism of Jesus, and then his 40 days of temptation in the wilderness. Next Jesus returned home. He didn't start his public ministry until he heard of John the Baptist's arrest by Herod. At that point he began, and Matthew summed up the essence of his gospel, “From that time on Jesus began to proclaim, ‘Repent, for the kingdom of heaven is at hand’”(4.17). In other words, “God's Kingdom is arriving, so it's time to change”. He went around preaching this gospel, proclaiming its good news, and he cured “every disease and sickness among the people” (4.23). We read that his

fame spread so far that people came from Syria and beyond the Jordan (these are the people of what we today call the Arab world), they came from Decapolis (the 10 cities of the Greeks and Romans, the forbears of us “westerners”), from Judea and Galilee (the Jews). People from “the whole world” were coming to Jesus – not just the Jews. And when he saw this crowd, Matthew tells us, he went up on a hillside, sat down, and began to teach them. These are perhaps his best loved words:

“Blessed are the poor in spirit. Blessed are those who mourn. Blessed are the meek. Blessed are those who are persecuted.” Blessed! When we hear these things, we should find it astonishing! These people are hardly the blessed! The meek get trampled, the persecuted are unjustly dealt with, those who mourn have experienced real loss, and the spiritual zeroes don’t have the resources to deal with these kinds of problems (or to connect with the God might help!). In terms of our world, these people are hardly blessed. Our world believes in something very different. Blessed are the sports heroes who make \$100,000 an hour when they play childhood games. Blessed are those with the biggest armies, for they shall prevail. Blessed are those who yell and scream, for they shall get their way. Blessed are the famous, for they shall get many Facebook likes. But, really, it was no different in Jesus day. These assertions by Jesus would have been just as astonishing to their ears as our’s. So who is flying upside down? Jesus, or us?

But... there was something different at that moment. As we’ve heard, the essence of Jesus preaching was, “The Kingdom of God is at hand; it’s time to change”. The people who sat on that hillside knew it, for the Kingdom’s power was so concretely visible in the many miracles Jesus had performed. Something extraordinary was happening, and people came on foot 100 km’s or more to see it, to be a part of it. Diseases were being cured, pains relieved, demons cast out, the lame were walking, epileptics ceased having seizures, people had their questions answered, their fears relieved. People were being given hope. Yes, people with needs and hurts and troubles were being blessed. The Kingdom of heaven must be at hand! They were seeing the world now through a different perspective. They were seeing it through the incredible, expectation-ending, assumption destroying, world twisting ministry of Jesus. Indeed there was something different going on which ran against common wisdom.

A writer some of you have discovered and enjoyed is Henri Nouwen – a Roman Catholic priest who helped countless people discover the depth of spirituality. He wrote numerous books that all sold very well. For 15 years he was a professor at Yale and then Harvard. He was in great demand as a speaker. In terms of our world he had it all (well, except for those three little vows about, you know, poverty, chastity and obedience). Then, suddenly, in 1985 he turned it all aside to move to the Daybreak Community outside Toronto, where he became the daily assistant and companion to a young man named Adam – a man with severe handicaps. Nouwen woke him, bathed him, brushed his teeth, dressed him, fed him. Adam’s limbs were severely contorted, he often had grand mal seizures. Adam could not speak, and he only rarely made eye contact. Philip Yancey wrote of his visit to Nouwen at

Daybreak, “I must admit I had a fleeting doubt as to whether this was the best use of Nouwen’s time. I have heard him speak, and have read many of his books. He has much to offer. Could not someone else take over the menial task of caring for Adam?” Yancey delicately broached this question with Nouwen, who informed Yancey that Yancy had totally misinterpreted the situation. Nouwen insisted, “It is I, not Adam, who gets the main benefit from our friendship”. In Nouwen’s sole focus in serving Adam, Nouwen had come to know a new kind of spiritual peace which had eluded him at Yale and Harvard. He had discovered the real depth of the Beatitude, “blessed are the merciful for they shall receive mercy”. In dwelling in a tender world of love giving to one in need, Nouwen had discovered the full impact of what it’s like to live in the full appreciation that our God is a God of blessing – that the order of the Kingdom of Heaven was indeed different from our expectations in the world – and that a Kingdom perspective was richer! He saw that the good news of the Kingdom of Heaven is that God blesses both the anonymous cripple and the spiritual super star. To return to that analogy, Nouwen in this discovered that he was now flying right side up.

On the mount Jesus said, “Blessed are those who work for peace.... Blessed are those who are persecuted for the sake of righteousness”. The novelist Leo Tolstoy wrote a book called “The Kingdom of God is Within You”, in which he dealt with the Sermon on the Mount. 50 years later a Hindu named Mohandas Gandhi read the book. He came to appreciate that God was a peace maker, and that God’s blessings were intended to be peace making. He saw that in Jesus Christ, according to these Christians, that God was the ultimate peace maker in having the Son die for sin. This is a big part of the good news of the Kingdom of Heaven. So Gandhi decided, after reading Tolstoy’s book on the Sermon on the Mount, to live out this Beatitude literally. He thought, “If that is how God is – if God indeed blessed these kind of people this way – this is how I will be”. Peace makers mimic our peace making God, and together live in a kingdom of blessing. Years later a preacher named Martin Luther King Jr. studied Gandhi’s tactics and also took up the literal living out of this Beatitude. Not everyone in the Black community followed this path – some embraced the rhetoric of “Black Power”. But who do we remember today? The beliefs of Gandhi and King that the Kingdom of Heaven was a kingdom of blessing got them persecuted, even to the point of assassination. But 55 years later, 70 years later, it is all too easy to name who was flying right side up.

My favourite theologian, Stanley Hauerwas, has this to say about the Sermon on the Mount, “The most interesting question about the Sermon is not, Is this really a practical way to live in the world? but rather, Is this really the way the world is? What is “practical” is related to what is real. If the world is a society in which only the strong, the independent, the detached, the liberated, and the successful are blessed, then we act accordingly. However, if the world is really a place where God blesses the poor, the hungry, and the persecuted for righteousness’ sake, then we must act in accordance with that reality or else appear bafflingly out of step with the way things are”. (Resident Aliens, pg. 88).

The Beatitudes ask us this question, “How do you look at the world?” When it comes down to our personal core beliefs, we all have an answer to this question. Is it a “dog eat dog world”? Is it “don’t worry, be happy?” Or do you see a world of God’s gracious blessing, in which God moves through history? The Beatitudes ask us, “Who are the blessed ones?” Is it the rock stars, the oilpatch CEO’s, the person who inherits a million dollars? Or, is the world fundamentally different? Is this a world where there are special blessings of God for the poor in spirit (that’s us), for those who mourn (that’s us), for the meek (quite often us), for those who yearn for the right way to live under God (that’s our calling), for the merciful and the pure in heart (that can be our destiny, with the Holy Spirit’s help)? Where we look for the blessings of life will determine how we live this life.