

“Blessed are ... who?” a sermon based on Matthew 5:1-12 preached by Kerry Enright at Knox Church Dunedin New Zealand on 29 January 2017.

Sometimes when we read the Bible or hear it read, we quickly identify with a figure in the story.

For example, if we are struggling to access health care and we know what it is like to be pushed aside again and again, we identify with the woman pushed to the back of the crowd, reaching to touch the hem of Jesus’s clothes. If we approached today’s gospel that way we would say – this is a story about disciples. We are disciples. It is addressed to us. Jesus is speaking directly to us.

But I don’t think we can be shoe-horned into the story as easily as that. I think we are observers of an interaction between Jesus and a particular group of people. We belong in the crowd, seated behind the disciples, observing, wondering what it means for us.

I say that because of what I said last Sunday. Last Sunday I spoke about the call of the first disciples. Jesus began his movement in Zebulun and Naphtali, in the borderlands between competing powers, the land across which invading armies first marched, and the land which retreating armies last left. Jesus began his movement among people who were used to rulers breathing down their necks. As if it was the north of Syria or the edge of Turkey or the border between India and Pakistan.

For the moment, the ruler was the Roman Emperor with legions of soldiers and in the face of which local people had little power. They seemed helpless to resist.

Jesus began his movement in a small town in those borderlands, Capernaum, not in one of the major cities, nor in Jerusalem, the centre of power and influence.

Jesus began his movement among fishers who bore the brunt of an unfair economy and unjust taxes, who had to pay to fish and who had to pay taxes even if their fishing was unsuccessful.

Jesus began his movement among people who in 37AD went on strike rather than support the Empire, beside farmers who refused to till the soil, refused to plant the crops, refused to harvest the produce, and whose protest spread to Jerusalem.

And the beginning of the Jesus movement was triggered by the arrest of John the Baptist. Those were among the disciples who sat on the mountain that day. He was addressing people who, to all outward appearances were powerless, on the edge and living in the region and shadow of death.

Who are they? They are poor in spirit – they did not have the vigour, the strength, the might, the spirit of the Roman Empire, legions of marching soldiers.

They mourn – they lived in the shadow of death, in the region of conquering armies. They had seen people killed, crucified, imprisoned. And they barely lived, just subsisted. They mourn for how things are.

They are meek – they had no choice. They were bowed by the Empire, without influence.

They hunger and thirst for right living, fair taxes, a just economy, proper treatment, a sound society.

Their hearts long for the empire to leave, for people to be able to live in peace.

They long for the peace God promised to the people of God, from time immemorial.

And when they go on strike, when they refuse to support the Empire, when they withdraw their labour and let crops die and refuse to feed the soldiers, they bear the brunt of the Empire's power, they suffer vilification and harassment and ridicule.

Jesus is saying, the kingdom of heaven is near.

The kingdom of heaven, not the Empire of Rome, not the ruler of the emperor.

Rather, the empire of God, the rule of God, the realm of God, it is near to you.

He is saying to these disciples, poor in spirit, mourning, meek, hungry and thirsting for the right way – the empire of God is coming and you will be part of it. One day your mourning will end. You who are meek, of necessity, you who have no freedom to be otherwise, you will inherit the earth. You who long for the right way, for things to be just and fair, that right relating, that proper economy, those just taxes, they will come. You who show mercy, who care for each other and support each other, you will receive mercy.

These are revolution words. They were there at Christmas in the mouth of Mary:

“God has scattered the proud in the thoughts of their hearts. He has brought down the powerful from their thrones and lifted up the lowly; he has filled the hungry with good things and sent the rich away empty.”

Galvanising, heartening, hopeful words. Words to build a movement.

Now we are sitting further up the bank, watching what is happening here. Will we anchor our identity in this coming kingdom? Will we secure our hope in the new world that God is bringing?

The world you know will not bless you.

Deep joy, secure joy, true joy, comes in your giving yourself to the world God intends, God brings. So the beatitudes are not values to which we aspire. They are not goals, ways of being, that when we fail to exhibit, we fail.

It is not as easy as that.

We are invited to be the blessing ones. We are invited to be part of the movement of blessing, as Jesus blesses; to be a community of blessedness.

To be part of a revolutionary movement that blesses people who are poor in spirit compared with those honoured for being part of the empire.

To be part of a revolutionary movement in which the meek are honoured and those who hunger and thirst for righteousness will be fully supported.

We stand with Jesus to bless. And sometimes the people will be us. It means offering a distinct blessing. There is a shape to this blessedness.

Not a vague ... bless you.

Let me contrast what our society blesses compares with what Jesus blesses:

Society says - Blessed are people rich in things and in self-assurance. Blessed are those with prospects for marriage and work, they will be successful.

Jesus says – Blessed are the poor in spirit.

Society says - Blessed are those untouched by loss. Blessed are those whose loved ones enjoy health, because they will not worry.

Jesus said - Blessed are people who mourn what is happening.

Society says - Blessed are those with power because they can make things happen.

Jesus said- Blessed are the meek.

Society says - Blessed are people who can buy pleasure, because they can do what makes them feel good.

Jesus said - Blessed are people who are hungry and thirsty for righteousness.

Society says - Blessed are those who are realistic about doing the right thing, prepared to compromise when needed.

Jesus said: Blessed are the pure in heart.

Society says - Blessed are people who can sit in judgement over others, because they can direct people.

Jesus said - Blessed are people who show mercy.

Society says - Blessed are people who win, who do better than others. Blessed are people who can beat opponents, make the system work for them, undermine others and get their way, who know how to win.

Jesus said - Blessed are people who make peace.

Society says - Blessed are those who, doing good things, receive accolades.

Jesus said - Blessed are people harassed because they are righteous.

Society says – Blessed are those who, following Jesus, are praised respected and popular, with a good reputation.

Jesus said - Blessed are you when people insult you and harass you because of me. Be full of joy, for you are part of the kingdom of heaven, this world as God is making it.

The invitation is clear – to keep letting Jesus make us a community of Jesus-blessedness.

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