

## **Grounding Jesus' Vision**

Matthew 5:1-12

4<sup>th</sup> after Epiphany. February 2, 2020

### **Text:**

When Jesus saw the crowds, he went up the mountain; and after he sat down, his disciples came to him. 2 Then he began to speak, and taught them, saying: 3 "Blessed are the poor in spirit, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven. 4 "Blessed are those who mourn, for they will be comforted. 5 "Blessed are the meek, for they will inherit the earth. 6 "Blessed are those who hunger and thirst for righteousness, for they will be filled. 7 "Blessed are the merciful, for they will receive mercy. 8 "Blessed are the pure in heart, for they will see God. 9 "Blessed are the peacemakers, for they will be called children of God. 10 "Blessed are those who are persecuted for righteousness' sake, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven. 11 "Blessed are you when people revile you and persecute you and utter all kinds of evil against you falsely on my account. 12 Rejoice and be glad, for your reward is great in heaven, for in the same way they persecuted the prophets who were before you.

### **Reflection:**

When I was young, I used to watch my father practise yoga. He would assume various positions and meditate. He often said, "Yoga is good for the body and the mind," but it did not seem important to me at the time. One day he caught my attention by standing on his head. He braced his elbows on the ground, lifted his back, straightened his knees and then lifted his feet up toward the ceiling. It looked great. I wanted to learn that pose so I could show off to my friends. I practised that headstand pose over and over, but I kept falling down; it was not easy.

Even though I couldn't hold the pose for long, after much repetition I gradually learned to do it. Interestingly, when I stood on my head, I saw the world differently. The world was upside down. Grass stretched up in front of my eyes. Trees grew down. Birds and clouds flew under my feet. When I stood on my head, I saw everything in a new way. There was not much difference among the height of human beings, the grass, lumps of earth and stones on the ground; all were relatively the same from my new perspective. The ants no longer seemed as small as I recalled. Adults seemed no taller or bigger than children. And even small children looked tall.

Here in Canada, I took lessons in yoga; there were only two men out of the dozen people in our class. It looked to me as if yoga was for women, but, of course, it is for anyone. Some scholars even suggest that Jesus must have learned yoga. During the "lost years," those between Jesus being 12 and 30, we don't have any record of Jesus' life. According to the history of the Mar Thoma Church in South India, Jesus spent some time in India. I don't know if he learned to do headstands there, but I do know that, in the record of the Beatitudes, Jesus speaks as if he were looking at life and the world upside down from the conventional perspective.

I muse that Jesus must often have stood on his head to see things differently, because his messages often turn conventional wisdom and the world's value system upside down and inside out. At that time, conventional wisdom must have put it this way: blessed are the clever, for they shall not be fooled; blessed are the strong, for their enemies shall fear them; blessed are the wealthy, for they shall never go hungry. Doesn't that sound more familiar? This is still our

conventional wisdom today. We are trying to be clever, strong, and wealthy. We believe these aspirations will surely make us happy.

However, Jesus sees things differently. He says, blessed are the poor, the meek and the sorrowful. We might react by thinking he is making a bad joke or being sarcastic. Whoever finds happiness through being hungry and thirsty for righteousness or by being reviled and persecuted? Rejoice and be glad in that! No one with any sense is going to agree with any of these biblical descriptors of happiness and values. But Jesus does not ask for anyone's approval; he just invites us to view the world differently.

At this point we might ask why Jesus would preach the message in today's lection. Today's scripture selection is commonly called the Sermon on the Mount or the Beatitudes. Whatever it is called, these words of scripture are recorded in Matthew as the inaugural sermon of Jesus' ministry. From this week until the third week of February, for three weeks we are going to reflect on Jesus' Sermon on the Mount. To understand the sermon, we need to reflect the situation in which Jesus lived. I would like to give two brief examples of what it was like living under the kingdom of Caesar.

Firstly, the people, who were mostly farmers, were struggling under the burden of having to pay about 40 to 50 per cent tax on their income to the Roman colonial empire. In addition to paying the Roman taxes, the Jewish people had to pay tithes to the temple priests according to the Torah, the Jewish law. So, all together, the amount of taxes was a heavy burden for the people to bear in that society.

Secondly, the people had to keep the "holiness code" according to the Torah. At that time one of the most important commandments was, "You shall be holy, for I the Lord your God am holy" (Leviticus 19:2). According to this law, the people were forced to live a holy life. At that time, to be holy meant to keep oneself separated from unclean people and things, to avoid anything that would defile holiness. However, it was very hard for farmers and fishers to keep the law by keeping themselves separate from what was deemed "unclean" such as dead fish and animals. As we know, farming and fishing work cannot be done without dealing with what is called "dirty" under the religious law.

In this situation, the people were politically oppressed, culturally colonized by the Roman Empire and economically forced to pay huge amounts of taxes and religiously stigmatized as "sinners." The people had absolutely no room to step backwards from keeping the law. Out of the depth of the people's suffering, Jesus sees his ministry. His inaugural sermon grows out of these circumstances. So, we too can hear his message.

I am wondering what Jesus message would be to us if he were living in our time. In our human history there were frequent epidemics. The medieval Black Death (1347-51) and the Spanish flu (1918) caused many deaths and severe illness to human beings. However, in our day, the quality of health care has been greatly improved. With a disease prevention system, public health and personal hygiene in place, we human beings have been successful in overcoming the outbreaks. Here are some examples: the SARS in 2003, the Ebola in 2014, and the MERS in 2015. Relatively the 21st century epidemics have caused few deaths; the entire world has learned how

to control the viruses and we know how to prevent their spread. Perhaps more fearful than the new virus is the virus of hate and exclusion. The most dangerous virus is a mix of fearmongering and racial stereotyping. With the efforts of frontline health care professionals and personal hygiene, we will overcome this virus soon.

In Jesus' sermon on the Mount, his message is about the blessing of the oppressed – the poor, the mourners, the meek and those who hunger and thirst for righteousness. If Jesus were here today, he would bless health care workers and those who are suffering from the virus.

From the ground level, we may begin to see more clearly God's blessed ones in places it would hardly have occurred to us to look. We may begin to realize that the blessed ones are not just people we can help but people who can help us to see what we can do together for the common good. From a different perspective, we may begin to see that those who have been bruised for peace and justice are not the sad ones but the happy ones, because they have found something worth being bruised for, something worth living for and something worth dying for.

From a different perspective, we begin to see what God sees and how God acts. We can be companions with God and with God's blessed ones. We too will be blessed, we who, when we stand on our heads, share God's dreams for the world. Perhaps I should resume the yoga practice of standing on my head and meditating. So that I too gain a new perspective, God's dream, and, of course, to maintain a healthy life. Will you join me in practising yoga? Thanks be to God for this new dream from the ground.

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