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Donal Dorr *The Beatitudes*

In the Jewish scriptures Moses is a key figure, the only person who had the privilege of speaking face to face with God. The Bible tells us that after he led his people out of Egypt, he spent time communing with God on Mount Horeb (also called Mount Sinai) and brought down to his people the Ten Commandments carved on tablets of stone. From that time onward, these were the fundamental moral rules which governed the daily lives of the Jewish people; and we Christians have 'inherited' them to govern our moral behaviour.

In the Christian scriptures, Jesus is seen as the new Moses. The Gospels tell us that he often went up to the hills to commune with God. But he didn't come down with a new set of Commandments carved in stone. Being a faithful Jew, and speaking to Jewish people, Jesus could take for granted that he and they were bound by the Ten Commandments. But Jesus invited his friends and followers to go far beyond keeping these ancient commandments in order to avoid being punished by God. He gave all

who wished to follow him a new set of guidelines which have come to be called the 'beatitudes'. In St Matthew's Gospel they read as follows: *'Blessed are the poor in spirit ... blessed are those who mourn, blessed are the meek ... blessed are those who hunger and thirst for justice etc.'* (Matthew 5:3-12).

“ In giving us these 'beatitudes' Jesus puts before us a set of high and quite demanding ideals which, if we live by them, will enable us to live joyfully as close friends of God. And he invites us to carve them, not on stone, but on our hearts. ”

DEMANDING IDEALS

In giving us these 'beatitudes' Jesus puts before us a set of high and quite demanding ideals which, if we live by them, will enable us to live joyfully as close friends of God. And he invites us to carve them, not on stone, but on our hearts. What this means in practice is that, as Pope Francis says, we accept them 'not from a sense of obligation, not as a burdensome duty, but as the result of a personal decision which brings us joy and gives meaning to our lives.' (*Evangelii Gaudium, The Joy of the Gospel*, paragraph 269)

These 'beatitudes' can be seen as invitations to us to live the kind of life that Jesus himself was living: a

simple life, where we are not weighed down by a struggle to gain more and more possessions; an unassuming gentle life; a peaceful life devoted to promoting harmony in our own families and communities and in the wider society; and a life where we have the courage to put up with being misunderstood and rejected. The Beatitudes offer us assurance that, if we do our best to be real followers of Jesus by living up to these high ideals, we will be blessed by God.

DIFFERENT VERSIONS

Jesus spoke directly and spontaneously to his different audiences; and we can be sure that he wasn't just reading out a sermon that he had written down previously – or even that he was using prepared notes. It is quite likely that he gave very much the same message, but with some variations, to different groups on numerous occasions. His message was passed on to others by word of mouth; and it was only quite a number of years later that the message came to be written down by the Gospel writers Saint Matthew and Saint Luke. This helps us to understand why these two evangelists have two somewhat different versions of the Beatitudes.

When Jesus was speaking to his friends and to the crowds who gathered around him, he was speaking in the Aramaic language. But when, several years later, his words were written down in the Gospels they were translated into Greek. About three hundred years later the Gospels were translated into Latin. And in more recent times they have been translated into practically every language that is spoken today.

TRANSLATION DIFFICULTIES

However, translation is a difficult task. So, a problem arose when it came to translating the Beatitudes into English. The word 'beatitude' is not a truly English word; it is simply taken over, in a slightly modified spelling, from the Latin word 'beatitudo' which

can be translated into English as 'blessedness' or as 'happiness'. The issue facing those who translate the Beatitudes into English is whether to use the word 'blessed' or the word 'happy'.

The original translators used the word 'blessed': 'Blessed are the poor in spirit ... blessed are the meek ... blessed are those who hunger and thirst for justice etc.' And many of the different English versions continue to use this word 'blessed'. But some of the more recent English versions replace the word 'blessed' with the word 'happy'. 'Happy are the poor in spirit ... happy are the meek ... happy are those who hunger and thirst for justice etc.'

The key point in what Jesus was saying is that the only way to become truly happy is to be blessed by God. We cannot ensure that we will be happy by becoming more and more wealthy and powerful. Happiness comes only as a gift of God. Furthermore, the kind of happiness that is promised to us by Jesus does not mean that we will never be sick, or at times feel 'low', anxious, sad, or even quite troubled in mind. After all, the Gospels tell us that Jesus himself cried at the tomb of Lazarus and that in his Agony in the Garden he was utterly weighed down by grief.

In later articles I hope to write about some or all of the individual beatitudes. But before I finish this first more general article, I want to recall some comforting words from Pope Francis for those who may wonder how they could still be happy even when they are in mourning or are being persecuted: 'When hard times come, when the cross casts its shadow, a supernatural joy endures even if it is there only as a flicker of light born of our personal certainty that, when everything is said and done, we are infinitely loved' (*Gaudete et exultate, Rejoice and be glad*, paragraph 125). ■

The Beatitudes

Matthew 5:3-12

Blessed are the poor in spirit: for theirs is the kingdom of heaven.

Blessed are the meek: for they shall possess the land.

Blessed are they who mourn: for they shall be comforted.

Blessed are they that hunger and thirst after justice: for they shall have their fill.

Blessed are the merciful: for they shall obtain mercy.

Blessed are the clean of heart: for they shall see God.

Blessed are the peacemakers: for they shall be called the children of God.

Blessed are they that suffer persecution for justice' sake, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven.

