

## REVISITING THE BEATITUDES

The other evening my wife and I found something that is increasingly rare these days: a delightful program on T.V. On PBS we saw a wonderful documentary unfold on the life of Richard Rodgers. Rodgers, you recall, was the composer of so many of the great musicals that made Broadway part of the lexicon of the world. An important sub-theme going through the documentary was that Rodgers, like so many people of genius, had a very troubled existence. Toward the end of his life it was clear he was a physical wreck. Beset with problems ranging from alcoholism to various kinds of cancers, he was a pitiful figure; and yet, he could still produce music.

As the program was about to come to an end this disconnect between the condition of the man and the quality of his music began to trouble me. I made a comment about it to Patricia. Her response was something that is worthy of recall. “That’s what music does. It enables us to be what we never will be!”

I would like to revisit that comment when it comes to the beatitudes. In a way, the beatitudes invert the truism that the power of art is to put us into a world that never really will be. Instead, in the Sermon we learn the really real is the “will be”; what is -- is still to come. Yet, Jesus is announcing that what will be – the Kingdom of God – is about to impact what is already taking place in every day reality.

Without a doubt, my favorite place in Israel is the so-called Mount of Beatitudes. There, daily, under a marvelous Moreton Bay fig tree, countless pilgrims hear the words of the beatitudes recited as they look down on an octagonal church built to symbolize the eight beatitudes of the catechetical tradition of the church. And, beyond that, there is the backdrop of the beautiful Sea of Galilee.

In this peaceful setting it is easy, as we often do, to think of the Sermon on the Mount as a package of virtues that all wish to attain; like the very proper lady who, when I was living in Nashville some years ago, approached me over an issue that troubled her. She was worried about the biblical call to meekness and humility. Her Bible class had wandered into a heavy discussion over whether you could confess to being meek. Some wanted to say that the moment you did say you were meek was the precise time you forfeited the right to that claim. No, defining the elements of good character is a good thing! But polishing up on virtue is not what the beatitudes are about.

Rather, the beatitudes are a proclamation of statements of congratulation to those who receive the gift of the kingdom. To paraphrase in a Caribbean lingo, “you happy man.” The first four are announcements that God has already made the decision about the kind of people who will inherit his Kingdom. Against the backdrop of the people of Israel, it will be the possession of his little ones – the downtrodden: the poor, the meek, and those who mourn. But, as is typical of Matthew, you do not receive the blessings of the Kingdom simply as a handout – like FEMA’s \$2,000.00 debit cards. In the last four beatitudes we are told about what the little ones, those who are weary and burdened, are to be. They are to be extenders of mercy, pure in heart, peacemakers, and those prepared to suffer persecution on behalf of justice. To these the Kingdom is promised. Notice that the kingdom promise brackets the eight beatitudes in verses 3 and 10. Then, the world will be put together as God wants it to be. Or as Matthew would say it, God’s righteousness, or the heavenly world, has come, in its fullness.

So what are we to make out of these momentous announcements? Again, we need to remember that it is wrong to have the picture in our mind of Jesus sitting on the hillside dispensing moralisms. These are not the timeless truths of proverbial wisdom. To go down this road will lead to skepticism and the erosion of faith. Seldom do the meek inherit the earth. Mourners are not always comforted. And, as the wit says, "I have been rich and poor, and I can attest well: to be rich is better."

No, Jesus' announcements of God's decisions are predicated on a different reality. It is a promise built on the conviction that the world to come will work correctly – as the Creator intended. And, in many ways, it will be the opposite of what it is now.

N.T. Wright recalls the movie *The Right Stuff* about the daring test pilots, where men like Chuck Yeager were the first to probe at the edges of space. In this movie there is a scene where a pilot discovered some strange things happened when he broke the sound barrier. In order to keep control of the aircraft in this new dimension, the pilot had to read the instruments backwards.

The Kingdom is in a different dimension than this broken world. For those who will possess it Jesus has already given the marching orders. But sometimes we have to walk in a different step to much of what is taking place in this world. May God give us the courage to accept this reality and hear again Jesus' momentous announcements of God's decisions about the kingdom today.

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