

Trinity 2 - Beatitudes 2

10/06/18 18:30 St Peter's

"Blessed are the poor in spirit, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven." (Matt 5:3)

We are now in the second week of our new sermon series focusing on the 10 verses at the start of Chapter 5 of Matthew's Gospel. Today we are looking at the first of the Beatitude sayings - "Blessed are the poor in spirit, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven". This morning I spoke about who the Church may well be unintentionally excluding from our fold, perhaps because they are not like us. The challenge to every Christian is not to create the poor in spirit, because of the action we take making others feel excluded.

But tonight, I want to bring a different focus to this first Beatitude. I want us to think about what it might mean for me or you to be poor in spirit. Put simply, to be poor in spirit is to recognise our own poverty of spirit before God - our own lack of faith and need for God.

It is interesting to ask ourselves how we might expect Jesus to start his great teaching on what the Kingdom is like, and what is needed to follow him. We might suggest that he would start by talking about holiness, or being sinless. But he started by talking about being poor in spirit. Jesus is being counter-cultural to the established religion of his time, and I would of ours. For that always wants to proclaim that it is the strong or the rich spiritually that get things right with God. And Jesus tells us the opposite here.

How often do you feel completely isolated from God? Perhaps for days, weeks or even years? Some would say God feels far away for much of their life. Some, sadly, might admit that God has never felt that close. The counter-cultural wisdom of God is for us to understand that it is in these times when actually we are closest to God. For, to be poor in spirit is to realise that we do not have any resources within ourselves and therefore look to God for help and depend on him. To be poor in spirit is to stand without pretence before God, stripped of all self-sufficiency, self-security, and self-righteousness. "Here I am God. I don't feel close to you. I don't even feel confident you are listening. My life is a mess, and I want to be different" - these might be words we have all uttered from time to time.

Jesus uses lots of examples in his teaching to try to show us how God prioritises those in this state of spiritual poverty. Think of the woman in the second half of this evening second reading. At dinner with a Pharisee, she (the un-named woman) washes Jesus feet with expensive ointment. She has been excluded by the institutional religion, but it is Jesus who see her for what she is. It is in her gentle touch, her embrace, that she comes close to God, and God forgives her.

Or think about the prodigal son - it is when his life has got to the very bottom, when he lives and eats with the pigs, that he decides he has to go home, only to find his father eager to welcome him and celebrate with him. Being poor in spirit is when all logic says that we shouldn't be welcomed home by God, or when the religious authorities say we are not worthy or important enough, and yet God in Jesus tells us that not only are we welcome, but that we have the Kingdom of Heaven. It is in the poverty that the riches of heaven are found.

So to take this one step further. If it is in this spiritual poverty that our place with God is to be found, then God is trying to teach us to abandon ourselves our pride and foolish logic that says it is only through strength (power, money, etc.) that we will succeed. To be poor in spirit is to realise that we have nothing and are nothing apart from Jesus Christ. Without poverty of spirit, we can endure only one ruler: Me! We will fight to the death to preserve our sovereign rule over our kingdom of one. We will continue to believe that what we want matters. We will continue to do what we think is best and live how we want

to live and not allow Jesus to rule over us. Being poor in spirit is the only way we will allow Jesus to rule over our lives. Emptying ourselves that God might fill us.

That is the path Jesus took - Paul reminds us of that in Philippians 2 - Christ "emptied himself taking the form of a slave ... and became obedient to the point of death". Perhaps there ought to be a book for all Christians entitled "How to be nothing" or the "Blessing of a Nobody". Being poor in spirit is recognising that we have nothing to give to God. It is in our poverty of spirit that God can transform us to be the riches he desires of us. Might we learn together how to abandon our spiritual pride, self-confidence and arrogance, and seek spiritual poverty. And in doing so, discover that God is then very close to us.

Intercession

O God, of the Beatitudes, fill with joy those who are in poor spirit:

We pray for those who feel poor in their spirit because they are excluded. Strengthen their resolve in the face of opposition, stir the hearts of their excluders, and assure them of your promise of the Kingdom.

We pray for those who feel poor in spirit, who feel unworthy of you, undeserving of others, those who feel lost, or who dread this day. Bring them your peace, that they may know how much you love them. And may they find in others an understanding of your inclusion found in your Kingdom.

We pray for ourselves, so often poor in our spirit. May this place restore our faith in you, and may we be ready to share our poverty to find in your our riches.