

BIBLICAL RESOURCES

Apocalypse 7:2-4, 9-14; Psalm 24 (23); 1 John 3:1-3; Matthew 5:1-12

The Beatitudes of Jesus

Matt 5:1 When Jesus saw the crowds he went up a mountain. There he sat down, and when his disciples had gathered round him he began to address them. And this is the teaching he gave: 3 'Blessed are the poor in spirit; the kingdom of Heaven is theirs. 4 Blessed are the sorrowful; they shall find consolation. 5 Blessed are the gentle; they shall have the earth for their possession. 6 Blessed are those who hunger and thirst to see right prevail; they shall be satisfied. 7 Blessed are those who show mercy; mercy shall be shown to them. 8 Blessed are those whose hearts are pure; they shall see God. 9 Blessed are the peacemakers; they shall be called God's children. 10 Blessed are those who are persecuted in the cause of right; the kingdom of Heaven is theirs. 11 'Blessed are you, when you suffer insults and persecution and calumnies of every kind for my sake. 12 Exult and be glad, for you have a rich reward in heaven; in the same way they persecuted the prophets before you. (Revised English Bible version)

INITIAL OBSERVATIONS

(i) There are twenty-seven Beatitudes in the New Testament. The first is in Matthew 5:1 and the last is in Rev 22:14.

(ii) The Beatitudes in Matthew (invitation texts) are to be interpreted within the Sermon on the Mount and alongside the corresponding narrative section, chs. 8-9. Matthew leaves out the woes of Luke, but he has his own dire warnings!

KIND OF WRITING

(i) In rhetorical terms, this text is an introduction, an *exordium*, designed to get the attention, good will and receptivity of the hearers. It achieves these aims (a) by awakening a desire for happiness; (b) by naming the present situation and (c) by proposing attitudes and actions that lead to salvation in heaven.

(ii) Matthew's Beatitudes are chiefly

apocalyptic, promising end-time reversal. They thus reveal a difficult situation in his community, perhaps a result of the probably recent break with the mother faith of Judaism.

(iii) In this gospel, there are nine beatitudes, in a significant order:

- 1-4 passive attitudes
- 5-8 active attitudes (with 8 as a bridge to 9)
- 9 beatitude on persecution

Beatitude 8 is from Matthew's own source. Cf. 1 Pet 3:14: "But even if you do suffer for doing what is right, you are blessed. Do not fear what they fear, and do not be intimidated, but in your hearts sanctify Christ as Lord. Always be ready to make your defence to anyone who demands from you an accounting for the hope that is in you." (1Pet 3:14-15)

OLD TESTAMENT BACKGROUND

There are very many "blessing" sayings in the Old Testament, especially in the psalms. In fact, the Psalter opens with one such "happy" saying. In general, the sayings occur in two settings: (a) in the Wisdom writings and (b) in the Apocalyptic books. The wisdom beatitude is a desire for practical advice, which will lead to a peaceful life; the apocalyptic beatitude encourages endurance until God acts and reverses the present calamity, whatever that may be.

NEW TESTAMENT FOREGROUND

(i) The Sermon on the Mount is the first of five great discourses in Matthew's Gospel. It is sometimes given the title "Blessings: entering the Kingdom" and could be read in light of the fifth discourse (23-25), "Woes: the coming of the Kingdom."

(ii) Within that overall pattern, the Sermon on the Mount (on the Plain in Luke) has several possible outlines, including a concentric pattern. This lets us to see that the opening beatitudes may

Thought for the day

Today we celebrate the community of faith, being in communion with all the saints, a day of both thanksgiving and vision. Thanksgiving because of the example and inspiration of the saints, who have come to maturity, to the measure of the full stature of Christ. (Eph 4:13). Vision because our Gospel today describes the path we must take to make the same journey home to God. If we wish to join the saints both now and into eternity, we must make our own the "mission statement" of Jesus, which is the Sermon on the Mount and especially the opening invitation to true happiness.

Prayer

Jesus you are our teacher within and today we ask your help. Just as you have brought our brothers and sisters to full maturity in you, so also guide us and be with us as we walk your Way. By your grace, may we too be counted among saints in the present moment and in the life to come.

helpfully be read in conjunction with the corresponding exhortations in 7:13-27.

(iii) The Beatitudes are found also in Luke 6:20-26, where four beatitudes are matched by corresponding four woes. It is possible to compare both traditions to see if there is a more original form behind the texts we have now in our hands. It is possible that the Q (Saying Source) beatitudes originally read as follows:

*Blessed the poor
for of them is the kingdom of God*
*Blessed the mourners
for they shall be consoled*
*Blessed the hungry
for they shall be satisfied*

With that in mind, we can notice the editorial changes and additions in Matthew 5, which reveal his own *theology* of the Beatitudes.

ST PAUL

Rejoice in the Lord always; again I will say, Rejoice. Let your gentleness be

known to everyone. The Lord is near. Do not worry about anything, but in everything by prayer and supplication with thanksgiving let your requests be made known to God. And the peace of God, which surpasses all understanding, will guard your hearts and your minds in Christ Jesus. (Phil 4:4-7)

BRIEF COMMENTARY

Verse 1 The motivation for the teaching is implied by “when he saw the crowds”, that is, he felt compassion. Cf. *When he saw the crowds, he had compassion for them, because they were harassed and helpless, like sheep without a shepherd.* (Matthew 9:36)

The location is the symbolic mountain of Moses, thus carrying forward the Mosaic typology of this Gospel. Jesus sits, i.e. he takes up a position of authority. The immediate audience is the disciples and the message is first of all for them.

Verse 2 The Greek is more wordy (*opening his mouth, he began to teach them*), thus providing quite a solemn opening intended to create suspense and anticipation. What will the teaching be?

Verse 3 In comparison with the Q beatitude above, Matthew has “spiritualised” this teaching. Certainly for the Lucan community, poor meant “without money” (as in the Acts). Matthew does not exclude real property, so a good interpretation of Matthew’s version is: *Happy are those who know their need of God* (NEB). It really means those who are in want, living in dire straits: such people have come to recognise that God alone is their source of hope and life.

Verse 4 In the ordinary sense, mourners are those experiencing bereavement and loss. To mourn is a signal of suffering in the Old Testament, where the kings insist on “joy” when grief is appropriate. Thus there is prophetic permission to keep “the wound of the negative open” (Kierkegaard) while assuring the hearers of end-time reversal in the coming kingdom of God.

Verse 5 Linguistically, both “poor” (*ptōchos*) and “meek” (*praus*) go back to the *anawim Yahweh* (the poor of Yahweh) of the Hebrew Bible. On account of that, this beatitude closely resembles the one in v. 3. The range of meanings of *praus* is somewhat different: to be gentle, humble, considerate. Today the word meek comes across as negative, but it was not always so.

Verse 6 A comparison with the Q beati-

tudes above is illuminating. Matthew has added “and thirst for righteousness”. As a student of the Hebrew Bible, he is especially interested in justification/righteousness before God. The most pastoral way to translate righteousness is “to be in right relationship with God.” All the Gospels were written after Paul, so some dialogue with the Pauline tradition and its concerns about justification may be presumed.

Verse 7 Compare with Mt 7:2 and, perhaps, with 6:14. The related adjective “merciful” does come up again in this Gospel: Matt 9:13; 12:7; 23:23. Likewise the verb to have mercy: Matt 5:7; 9:27; 15:22; 17:15; 18:33; 20:30-31. Intriguingly, this comes up mostly in the familiar form “*eleison*”, as in *Kyrie eleison*.

Verse 8 Found also in Psa 71:3. Cf. *Blind Pharisee! First clean the inside of the cup, so that the outside may become clean too!* (Matthew 23:26)

Verse 9 Peace is a gift of proclamation according to Mt 10:13, but see also, for contrast, 10:34. Behind the Greek word for peace, *eirēnē*, we may presume the richer range of meanings of *shalom*, i.e. a quality of relationship with the other and not simply inner calm.

Verse 10 Reality breaks in here, as we read outside of the Sermon: *When they persecute you in one town, flee to the next; for truly I tell you, you will not have gone through all the towns of Israel before the Son of Man comes.* (Matt. 10:23). Cf. Matt 23:34.

Verse 11 The relationship with the Lord is explored later in the Gospel: Matt 10:18, 39; 16:25; 19:5, 29.

Verse 12 Cf. “*Woe to you when all speak well of you, for that is what their ancestors did to the false prophets.*” (Luke 6:26)

POINTERS FOR PRAYER

The blessings in the Beatitudes are primarily future blessings, but there can be an anticipation of the blessings in the present. At first reading some Beatitudes may seem to describe circumstances that you would like to avoid at all costs. Read them slowly. Stay with each one for a while.

Let yourself get a sense of the paradox involved in each one. Perhaps you have had an experience of a deeper and more authentic life, a blessing, when...

1. You were poor - you knew your need of God
2. You mourned – could feel for others

3. You were meek – not emotionally out of control
4. You hungered and thirsted for some cause
5. You were merciful rather than vengeful
6. You were pure in heart – a person of integrity, whose actions and intentions correspond
7. You were a peacemaker
8. You were persecuted because you stood for something

PRAYER

All-holy God, you call your people to holiness. As we keep the festival of your saints, give us their meekness and poverty of spirit, a thirst for righteousness, and purity of heart.

May we share with them the richness of your kingdom and be clothed in the glory you bestow.

READINGS 1 AND 3

Both readings are quite visionary and invitational, each in its own way. The Beatitudes invite us to the values of the Kingdom; the Apocalypse portrays the goal of all our striving.

THE RESPONSORIAL PSALM

Psalm 24 (23) is good for the feat, because it portrays in immensely practical terms the attitudes and actions which mark the committed believer. As often, the response says it all: *Such are the men who seek your face, O Lord.*

FEAST DAY INTRODUCTIONS

First reading

Apocalypse 7:2-4, 9-14

Even with some unfamiliar imagery, our reading is a great one for the feast. It holds out a powerful vision of paradise, beyond the struggles of this life.

Second reading

1 John 3:1-3

Who am I? Who are we? In plain words a deep account is given of who we all are in the love of God.

Gospel

Matthew 5:1-12

It can be hard to “hear” so familiar a reading. Perhaps there is a word or a feeling which matches my present experience?

They have washed their robes in the blood of the Lamb

Rev. 7:2 I saw another angel ascending from the rising of the sun, having the seal of the living God, and he called with a loud voice to the four angels who had been given power to damage earth and sea, 3 saying, “Do not damage the earth or the sea or the trees, until we have marked the servants of our God with a seal on their foreheads.”

Rev. 7:4 And I heard the number of those who were sealed, one hundred forty-four thousand, sealed out of every tribe of the people of Israel.

Rev. 7:9 After this I looked, and there was a great multitude that no one could count, from every nation, from all tribes and peoples and languages, standing before the throne and before the Lamb, robed in white, with palm branches in their hands. 10 They cried out in a loud voice, saying, “*Salvation belongs to our God who is seated on the throne, and to the Lamb!*”

11 And all the angels stood around the throne and around the elders and the four living creatures, and they fell on their faces before the throne and worshiped God, 12 singing, “*Amen! Blessing and glory and wisdom and thanksgiving and honour and power and might be to our God forever and ever! Amen.*”

Rev. 7:13 Then one of the elders addressed me, saying, “Who are these, robed in white, and where have they come from?” 14 I said to him, “Sir, you are the one that knows.” Then he said to me, “These are they who have come out of the great ordeal; they have washed their robes and made them white in the blood of the Lamb.

INITIAL OBSERVATIONS

The hymn built into this reading (in italics above) is familiar from the Liturgy of the Hours. Such a familiar foothold is always a help, especially when the overall text is somewhat obscure, even alien.

CONTEXT IN THE COMMUNITY

The social context is that of a community underling some kind of harassment or marginalisation. It probably does not mean direct full-on persecution, as that does not happen until the time of Diocletian. However, Domitian—the reigning emperor at the time of writing—strongly promoted the imperial cult and

preferred to be addressed as “our Lord and God” (*dominus et deus noster*; see Suetonius, *Lives of the Caesars, Domitian 13.2*). Because of their convictions, the early followers of the Nazarene were indeed on a collision course with the ideology of empire and its concomitant exploitation and injustice.

KIND OF WRITING

Apocalypses deal with the question of innocent suffering and the apparent power of evil. It may help to think of the NT Apocalypse as corresponding to the book of Job in the OT. Thus far in the telling, we have seen the introductory vision (Rev 1), the letters to the seven churches (2-3), the heavenly court at worship (4-5), all leading to the opening first six seals (6). That scene closed with an anguished exclamation and question, “*Fall on us and hide us from the face of the one seated on the throne and from the wrath of the Lamb; for the great day of their wrath has come, and who is able to stand?*” (Rev 6:16–17).

Rev 7:1-17 describes those who will indeed be able to stand and why, thus offering ultimate reassurance to the first hearers of the text. Thus, it makes for a suitable reading for the feast of All Saints. For clarity and brevity, the lectionary omits v. 1, vv. 5-8 and vv. 15-17.

RELATED PASSAGES

It would help to read Rev 4-5 in connection with Rev 7 because the links between the scenes are evident and strong. For instance, the Lamb, the throne, standing, hearing and seeing. Both passages are in a concentric pattern, with action of the Lamb at the centre in 5:4 and the multitude crying out in praise at the centre in 7:10. The questions form a key: “Who is worthy?” in 5:4 and “Who can stand?” in 6:17. In 4-5, the Lamb is the prime mover, so to speak, and in 7 the multitude is essentially passive, in receptive mode.

BRIEF COMMENTARY

Verse 2 Angels symbolise the transcendent world. As the bearer of God’s seal, this angel acts on behalf of God and with God’s authority.

Verse 3 The sparing of the faithful is signalled by a mark on the forehead (cf.

Ezek 9).

Verse 4 Spurious precision regarding the number is countered by v. 9: *After this I looked, and there was a great multitude that no one could count, from every nation.* (Rev 7:9). It means a vast, inclusive number.

Verse 9 Four, the number of places of origin, is a number of completion suggesting universality. The palm is the palm of victory.

Verse 10 Salvation is proclaimed in the present tense, anticipating the end and offering protection now before the end-time convulsions are triggered. The other uses of salvation are 12:10 and 19:1, also in contexts of joy-filled victory.

Verse 11 Cf. 4:4, 10 and 5:8.

Verse 12 The *seven* ascriptions of glory indicated totality or completeness. Cf. the robust song of victory in Rev 19.

Verse 13-14a The one speaking is an unspecified member of the twenty-four, who symbolise jointly the sons of Jacob and the apostles, that is, the Old and New Testaments bearing joint witness. NB two questions: *who* are they and *whence* have they come.

Verse 14b The writer names and acknowledges the bitter experience of the faithful. These are safe *in advance*, because the great ordeal is yet to come. Blood as a detergent is part of the dissonant symbolism of the Apocalypse. From a cultic point of view, blood is most sacred—it contains the life—and it is also therefore the most polluting of substances. This dissonance is meant to remind the readers of the paradox of Jesus’ death, God’s greatest outreach of compassion to fractured humanity, our closest point of contact with the deity. Outer robes represent the inner person, now pure because saved by the blood of the Lamb and faith in Jesus.

POINTERS FOR PRAYER

1. What keeps you going in times of trial when even faith itself is tested?
2. Are you “going through” anything at the moment? Are there seeds of hope?

PRAYER

Faithful God, let us know your presence and action in our lives, so that when our faith is tested, we will be strong in bearing witness to you and to the Lamb.

When he is revealed, we will see him as he is

1 John 3:1 See what love the Father has given us, that we should be called children of God; and that is what we are. The reason the world does not know us is that it did not know him. 2 Beloved, we are God's children now; what we will be has not yet been revealed. What we do know is this: when he is revealed, we will be like him, for we will see him as he is. 3 And all who have this hope in him purify themselves, just as he is pure.

INITIAL OBSERVATIONS

This is surely one of the most familiar and inspiring passages from 1 John. Our mind naturally focuses on the attractive expressions, but we should notice too that there is an edge to it all. The potential for mysticism is tempered by reality.

CONTEXT IN THE COMMUNITY

The community is living in great tension with "the world", the Jews and the former members who have left. To help people deal with with such antagonism, the writer emphasises the evolution from "now" to "then" in a way different from the realised eschatology of the Gospel.

KIND OF WRITING

Prologue: The Word of Life (1:1-4)

I. God is light (1:5-2:27)

II. God is righteous (2:18-4:6)

III. God is love (4:7-5:12)

Epilogue: Assurances (5:13-21)

There are several subsection in II above:

A. Good right / avoiding sin (2:28-3:10)

B. Love / the New Covenant (3:11-24)

C. The Spirit of Deceit (4:1-6)

RELATED PASSAGES

Beloved, let us love one another, because love is from God; everyone who loves is born of God and knows God. Whoever does not love does not know God, for God is love. God's love was revealed among us in this way: God sent his only Son into the world so that we might live through him. In this is love, not that we loved God but that he loved us and sent his Son to be the atoning sacrifice for our sins. Beloved, since God loved us so much, we also ought to love one another. No one has ever seen God; if we love one another, God lives in us, and his love is perfected in us. (1 John 4:7-12)

God is love, and those who abide in love

abide in God, and God abides in them. Love has been perfected among us in this: that we may have boldness on the day of judgment, because as he is, so are we in this world. There is no fear in love, but perfect love casts out fear; for fear has to do with punishment, and whoever fears has not reached perfection in love. We love because he first loved us. Those who say, "I love God," and hate their brothers or sisters, are liars; for those who do not love a brother or sister whom they have seen, cannot love God whom they have not seen. The commandment we have from him is this: those who love God must love their brothers and sisters also. (1 John 4:16-21)

"If the world hates you, be aware that it hated me before it hated you. If you belonged to the world, the world would love you as its own. Because you do not belong to the world, but I have chosen you out of the world—therefore the world hates you. Remember the word that I said to you, 'Servants are not greater than their master.' If they persecuted me, they will persecute you; if they kept my word, they will keep yours also. But they will do all these things to you on account of my name, because they do not know him who sent me. (John 15:18-21)

BRIEF COMMENTARY

Verse 1 Love is mentioned throughout (1 John 2:5, 10, 15; 3:1, 10-11, 14, 16-18, 23; 4:7-12, 16-5:3), with a special emphasis on love as a gift or grace. "Children" is the constant address in this letter: 1 John 2:1, 12, 14, 18, 28; 3:1-2, 7-8, 10, 18; 4:4; 5:1-2, 19, 21. It echoes Gospel usage (see above). Children of God is what we are *now*.

In the second part of v. 1, the edginess of 1 John is more apparent. Behind the sentence stands an implied syllogism. Fully written out it would be something like this: those who know God also know the children of God. But they do not know God, therefore they do not know the children of God. Cf. John 15:18-21 above. Cf. this other verse:

Everyone who believes that Jesus is the Christ has been born of God, and *everyone who loves the parent loves the child*. (1 John 5:1)

Verse 2 In the Gospel of John, "eternal life" is defined as follows: *And this is eternal life, that they may know you, the only true God, and Jesus Christ whom you have sent*. (John 17:3). It is, therefore, *now*.

In the Fourth Gospel, the tension towards the future, so typical of early Christianity, is somewhat relaxed. However, even here, when the writer mentions the word "reveal" (1 John 1:2; 2:19, 28; 3:2, 5, 8; 4:9), the word used is not *apocalyptō*, but rather *phaneroō*, meaning to cause to become visible, to disclose rather than to uncover. The writer hopes that this future hope will inspire us now, already in the present moment, as we see from the next verses.

The change to come is unknown, of course, but somehow we shall resemble God, just as children resemble their earthly parents. This evokes Genesis 1 and being created in God's image and likeness. It is in considerable tension with the biblical tradition elsewhere that no one can see God and live.

"But," he said, "you cannot see my face; for no one shall see me and live." (Exodus 33:20; cf. Gen 32:30; Deut 4:33, 5:24, 26; Judg 6:22, 13:22, and Isa 6:5).

Verse 3 To purify here means to be morally good in heart and in spirit, to be free from sin in our deeds. Our great hope affects how we live now.

POINTERS FOR PRAYER

1. To enjoy the love of God and to find ourselves in a state of wonder is very much part of our spiritual lives. In the grand scheme of things, this is who we are, this is who I am. It is really kind of wonderful.

2. We also live with a level of not being understood in our culture. How do we cope? Am I doing anything to bear better witness to the wonder of God's love for everyone?

3. The next life *is* mysterious of its nature. And, yet we hope: *And all who have this hope in him purify themselves, just as he is pure*. (1 John 3:3)

PRAYER

Lover and creator God, as we stand before the mysterious of who you are, we know that you hold us in being and you are to us as a father and a mother. Help us embrace and enjoy your love for us that we may grow into the kind of people you would like us to be. Amen.