

Blessings for us and our world

Pitt Street Uniting Church, 29 January 2017

A Contemporary Reflection by Rev Dr Margaret Mayman

Epiphany 4A

**Matthew 5: 1-12; Contemporary Reading: *Celebration* by Jim Cotter
in *Towards the City: a version of the Psalms*, prayer after Psalm 147**

This reflection can be viewed on You Tube at <http://www.pittstreetuniting.org.au/> under "Sunday Reflections" tab

The gospel reading from Matthew, announcing multiple blessings, has traditionally been called The Beatitudes. It's one of those biblical texts that is hung on walls. I remember as a child, seeing an embroidered version of it on my grandmother's wall.

Typically, we think that it is telling us to be like the ones who are described as blessed. But revisiting the passage this week, I think perhaps it is inviting us to see, to recognise, who and what God blesses.

So often this reading gets individualised and spiritualised, and people have struggled with how to translate the word that is rendered "blessed." There have been some awful suggested translations, the most egregious being Robert Schuller who called them "The Be Happy Attitudes."

That's not at all what they are. They are not guidelines for happiness for ordinary life. They are not a collection of pious platitudes about the attitude with which you go about your business -- business as usual, as our culture defines it.

The Greek word translated as blessed is *makarios*. It doesn't mean happy. It doesn't mean congratulations. Perhaps the most authentic translation is honoured. Honoured are you who are poor; honoured are you who are persecuted; honoured are you who are peacemakers. And the point of Jesus telling these people and groups that they are honoured is reversal. Reversal! Jesus is honouring those who are usually relegated to the margins.

We don't know about the historicity of the Sermon on the Mount. It almost certainly was not delivered as recorded in Matthew and it seems unlikely that the Lucan version that Matthew adapts and adds to was presented as a coherent sermon.

But what we do have here are sayings that appear authentic to the spirit of the historical Jesus. In Jesus time, they were addressed to people who were suffering on the edges of the empire, peasants who had lost their land, day labourers, ethnic minorities, women without the protection of male relatives, and other expendables.

The beatitudes were not addressed to the comfortable. They were a word for people whose livelihood was uncertain, whose voices were not heard, and whose existence was not valued.

Conventional wisdom is turned upside-down in the beatitudes by Jesus daring to name the poor, the meek, and the mournful as blessed ones.

But how does this make any sense? What is blessed about poverty or grief? Did Jesus mean that everything would be sorted out as “pie in the sky, in the sweet by and by, when we die”? Are the beatitudes describing only a future reward for suffering experienced now?

Because the beatitudes are certainly not describing the way the world works now. The economic and political norms of first century Palestine (and the politics of our world in the 21st century) tell us that the wealthy bear the signs of blessing. The powerful, not the meek, own the earth today and they seem determined to keep it tomorrow.

We live in a time when blessings are given to those who succeed, often at the expense of others. To be poor in spirit, peaceful, merciful, and meek will get you nowhere in a culture grounded in competition and fear.

What kind of blessing can Jesus be referring to?

I think that Jesus is teaching us something about God and about what is important to God. With the word “blessed,” Jesus is conveying, “*God cares about this*” or “*God commends this*.”

This reading is an invitation to shift our own perspective on what we might consider a blessing, and in this way, we are invited to participate in God's transformation of the world.

Jesus is saying: *This is what God commends: our alliance with the poor, the meek, the peacemakers, and the persecuted.* The good news and blessing for us that Jesus announces, is that we are invited into a new way of joining with God in creating the kind of world that God wants everyone to inhabit.

A world that is so different to the world that comes to us via our print, broadcast and electronic media. A total contrast to the ongoing incarceration of legitimate refugees on Manus Island and Nauru. So different to the plight of all the refugees who are now being turned away from the US because of race or religion.

Friday was International Holocaust Remembrance Day. This Friday, the US president signed an executive order stopping the arrival of all refugees and banning immigrants from many Middle Eastern nations (except the ones where he has business interests). Yesterday refugees, individuals and families, who had been vetted and approved, (some of whom were in-flight at the time of the Executive Order) were detained when they arrived at US airports and threatened with return to the countries from which they have fled. Scholars travelling to the US were denied boarding. Students attending American universities have been blocked from getting back into the US after visits abroad. Legal permanent residents were being stopped at foreign airports as they sought to return from a funeral.

There is also resistance to this callousness and cruelty. Human rights groups, lawyers, religious leaders and university professors are speaking out and preparing to resist.

On Friday, a new Twitter account reminded Americans of their history of refusal to save the vulnerable, on a day when the holocaust is remembered. “St. Louis Manifest” tweeted all through the day, photographs and names of passengers aboard the St. Louis, a German transatlantic liner that set sail on May 13, 1939. Almost all aboard were Jews, mostly German citizens, fleeing the Third Reich and hoping to gain entry into the United States. Their ship was turned away and the passengers forced to return to Europe, where 254 of them were killed in the Holocaust.

The photos show new parents, grandparents and teenagers enjoying outings and friends. Some of the tweets (that went out every five minutes) don't have photos, just names: Gerda Hermann, murdered at Auschwitz; Hilmar Heinemann, murdered at Dachau; Max Hirsch, murdered at Mauthausen.

The project was meant both as a memorial to Hitler's victims and a statement on the President's Executive Order.

In other signs of resistance and perhaps even hope, this week, one solitary young man, Loghman Sawari, who was 17 when he was first sent to Manus Island, has managed with false ID to flee to Fiji by plane, where he is seeking protection from persecution by the governments of Papua New Guinea and Australia. We know that people must have helped him to escape. People who gave a blessing. People who are a blessing.

It is to vulnerable, politically homeless people, that Jesus announces blessing – in his time and our time. To us and our fellow-citizens, Jesus is saying: God cares about this.

Jesus is not talking about a temporal realm of political or military power. Neither is he talking about an other-worldly, spiritual realm in the future. To speak of the reign of God or the kingdom of God – as he does in the reading we have heard - is to speak of Divine Presence, the source and power of love and justice released in the world.

When we see that this reign, this commonwealth, is both "not of this world" and also something very earthly and very political, we can see what a powerful manifesto these beatitudes are. This kingdom is a sanctuary where all are welcome, all are equal, all are nourished.

It is a place where God's passion for justice and God's concern for the poor are realized, and there is enough for everyone. This kingdom is a place where compassion is not limited to personal relationships but is part of the fabric of social and political life.

There are at least two principles inherent in the Beatitudes which are gifts to us today: one is hope and the other is compassion.

In the face of ongoing persecution of refugees in Australia, and the amping up globally of hostility to people from Syria and other Middle Eastern countries, it is tempting to turn away, either in cynicism or despair.

Hope is hard to find and so it is important to tell the stories of resistance. To know also that hundreds of people have gathered at JFK airport in New York to protest what is happening to the refugees.

In his 1986 Nobel lecture, holocaust survivor Elie Wiesel said: "*There may be times when we are powerless to prevent injustice, but there must never be a time when we fail to protest.*"

The Beatitudes invite us to the opposite point of view of cynicism; they invite us to hopefulness. We place our hope on the risen One, who offered hope to those without hope.

We must approach the world with a spirit of hope, even when the outward signs suggest otherwise. When we are hopeful, when we stand in the world sure of the possibility that the day will come when mercy, humility, peace, and love are shared, we will know that these are the descriptions of what it means to live in God's way.

The other principle of Beatitude living is compassion. Compassion does not mean pity or sympathy. It goes deeper.

The late Henri Nouwen offers an insightful description: compassion, he says, "*grows with the inner recognition that your neighbour shares your humanity with you. This partnership cuts through all walls which might have kept you separate. Across all barriers of land and language, wealth and poverty, knowledge and ignorance, we are one, created from the same dust, subject to the same laws, destined for the same end.*"

We are distinct individuals, but equally importantly, we share the gift of being created in God's image; so we belong to one another as family.

As we have baptised Maddie this morning, this is the world that we hope for; for her and for every other child made in God's image.

The Beatitudes for us, at this time in Australia and globally, are not just blessings (though they are surely that) but they are a call to action.

A call to action for the sake of creating the world God imagines. And these days, we need this reminder -- when our own imagination may be limited. When our hope for the future might have been dimmed. When we may think what we do and what we say and what we believe does not matter.

May we all find the strength in our everyday lives to respond to this call, to be this people.

May we be a blessing.