

The Beatitudes for an Upside-Down World

Readings

Matthew 5.1-12

Opening

The last time we were together, we embarked on a brief tour of Galilee—at once historical, geographical, and spiritual. Let's return to Matthew 4-5 in our pew Bibles again. Last Sunday I left you by the Sea of Galilee with four Jewish fishermen and their young rabbi, expectant that Matthew's landscape and his story, for they are inextricably linked, would soon change. Peter, Andrew, and the sons of Zebedee receive a pledge from their rabbi. He had said, "I will *make* you fishers of men."¹

Something awakens, something comes alive within when we answer God's summons, when we enter the field of action. We become who God created us to be for this time, for this place, for his Kingdom.

In the three verses following last week's story (and preceding the Sermon on the Mount), Matthew's geography changes after the calling episode. Jesus leaves the seashore and moves *throughout* Galilee—into the far reaches of Naphtali and Zebulun.

Matthew takes us from the Sea of Galilee into a different kind of sea on the borderlands—the sea of human affliction. This becomes their field of action. Jesus and his cadre of disciples encounter nearly every form of human misery in Galilee—sickness, pain, all

¹ Matthew 4.22

manner of diseases, seizures, paralysis, and the most paralyzing condition of all—possession by demons.

What does Jesus do? Everything his ancestors failed to do. He enters the heart of darkness, brings the kingdom of God near to those who cannot help themselves; to those who cannot even control their speech or their own bodies. Chronic pain dissipates in his presence; the paralyzed walk upright as he passes by. He preaches the gospel of the kingdom wherever he goes. His fame spreads across the border into Syria, Matthew says. Israel was chosen by God to be a light to the nations and now it's happening. This is what it looks like when the light of God comes to the nations. These starving souls, these healed masses become a crowd following Jesus. Jesus had said to the four fishermen, "Follow me, and I will make you fishers of men." Now they see what it looks like to be a fisher of men.

Three Feeding Roots

We're getting ready to ascend this mountain to meditate on Jesus' most famous sermon, but before we climb the mountain with our Lord and his disciples, I want us to see not only *where* Jesus has been in Galilee, but *who* Jesus is in Matthew's story. It makes all the difference how you hear the Beatitudes and the remainder of his sermon.

Matthew is the most Jewish gospel among the four gospel writers. That means Old Testament stories, figures, and prophecies are especially thick in Matthew's gospel story. Matthew wants us to see how Jesus makes sense of the whole story. You see it in plain sight as Matthew records events in Jesus' life, layering verses from Isaiah and Jeremiah on top of what's happening. Jesus fulfills this whole ancient story. But there are less obvious ways Matthew shows us how Jesus fulfills the story of Israel, too.

Our house has several oak trees in the front and back yards. I love our white and red oaks, but I do **not** love the annual carpet bomb of acorns every autumn. There are several places throughout the yard where the roots are exposed above ground. But I know there are many more roots underneath. I see a strong, stable white oak which means the the central root—the taproot—went down deep, expanded in multiple directions though I don't see them on

ground level. From that central anchor—the taproot—extensions called feeder roots branch off in multiple directions giving life, strength, stability, and depth.

Matthew gives us some prophecy fulfillment on ground level, but follow the taproot of Israel's history in Jesus' life story and you find more roots, more anchors, more depth than than we perceive on the surface.

Underneath the surface of these first five chapters in Matthew, we're seeing three major figures from Israel's story—three 'feeder roots' we might say—that Jesus fulfills in his life and ministry: prophet, priest, and king.

God established these three figures as institutions so that Israel would worship him in the beauty of holiness, faithfully obey and proclaim the truth of his Word, and rule with wisdom, mercy, and goodness. God gave these institutions so that Israel could fulfill her calling—to be a light to the nations. That's why prophets, priests and kings are anointed with oil in the Old Testament. Their anointing is a sign that they are set apart by God to fulfill a particular office so that *the whole people of God* would be a light for the nations.

Prophets teach the word of the Lord. They speak words of hope and words of judgment. Prophets reveal idolatry and call for repentance. They perform signs and wonders such as Elijah calling down fire on the altar at Mt Carmel. Prophets are not governed by kings; they are set apart to instruct kings in the ways of wisdom and righteousness.

Priests are anointed to be mediators between God and human beings. They offer sacrifices to God; they lead Israel to worship the Lord in holiness and in beauty. Priests declare the blessing of God over Israel, such as the great benediction of Israel: "The Lord bless you and keep, the Lord make his face to shine upon you and give you peace."

Finally, kings are anointed to extend wise and merciful rule, ever mindful that God alone is King of Israel and the whole earth. Kings must serve with fear before the Lord. Kings must seek the goodness of God and restrain evil.

Prophet, priest, and king. When these institutions were in tact; when there was harmony among the three (which was rare), Israel flourished. But when these figures turn away from God; when kings seek to silence, or even worse, kill the prophets; when priests neglect the

care of the poor, seeking their own comfort and gain; when false prophets speak from their own wisdom, or worse, declare lies; when institutions become diseased at the roots over centuries and generations; well, you get Naphtali and Zebulun dwelling in the shadow of death.

A Holy Prophet, Priest, and King

But you know what else you get when all these institutions collapse? In the mercy of God, in the fullness of time, “the virgin will conceive and bear a son, and they shall call his name Immanuel (which means God with us.)”

And Jesus is born of the Virgin Mary in the town of Bethlehem, which is the city of shepherd **Kings**. Then Matthew tells us sages from the east come to Jerusalem asking, “Where is he who is born **King** of the Jews?” They kneel before the infant Jesus with offerings befitting a **king**.

We see what kind of king Jesus will be when Satan takes him up the highest mountain, offers him all the kingdoms of the world, and Jesus refuses to bend his knee. Jesus comes to proclaim the kingdom of God in the shadows of darkness. He reveals his kingdom on a different mountain—the mount of the Beatitudes.

Later today we will celebrate Candlemas, when Mary and Joseph bring the infant Jesus into the temple. It is a sign of his great, high and holy **priesthood**. When Jesus steps into the Jordan River at age 30, we see again that Jesus will be the holy **priest** of Israel. In that River, Jesus stands in for all of Israel’s failures, her rebellion, her corruption, though he had no sin in himself. He takes that whole tragic story on himself so he can redeem it. And you know he’s God’s chosen priest because he’s anointed with the Holy Spirit in the form of a descending dove.

When Jesus begins preaching, he preaches with the words of a **prophet**: ‘Repent for the kingdom of heaven is near.’ When he preaches this message, he has apprentices with him, just like Elijah had Elisha with him. He performs powerful wonders of healing for every form of disease, he declares authority over demons and casts them out of human bodies.

There is no contradiction between his words of power and his actions in power. They are one and the same in this Prophet.

Ascending the Mountain with Prophet, Priest, and King

By the time you get to the mountain, three ancient figures converge in one man—Jesus of Nazareth is the prophet, the priest, and the king of Israel. When Jesus goes up the mountain to teach about the Kingdom, it looks a lot like the prophet Moses going up Mt Sinai, but Jesus speaks as one greater than Moses on the mountain. He reveals the Kingdom of Heaven that he alone embodies, and then he opens his mouth to speak the words a priest was ordained to proclaim: “Blessing.”

Do not underestimate the gravity of the word ‘blessed.’ When the word of blessing is withheld, the children of God suffer. But now a true priest of Israel speaks the word of blessing in the most agonizing places of the heart. ‘Blessed are the poor in spirit.’ For all who cannot get it together; for those who mourn, who cannot stop the tears from flowing: ‘blessing.’ Blessing in the place of your open wounds and your deepest scars.

The logic sounds ridiculous. Theirs is the kingdom of heaven? He’s the king and his kingdom is not *from* this world. So yes, the poor in spirit—yes, the kingdom of heaven is theirs.

And blessing on you meek. Who has the audacity to say the meek will inherit the earth? Only a King. He is not only a Priest who blesses, but the Anointed King. All you meek and ordinary people, souls overlooked each day; you who live in obscurity, pursuing faithfulness day after day; you who serve without any desire for recognition; you who care more about the glory of God than your own legacy—Blessing today; and someday you will inherit the earth that is Mine to give.

For all who hunger and thirst in a land of shallow wells,² you will be filled with goodness better than bread. Said the King who fed himself with the words of God while he battled starvation in the wilderness.

The merciful will not always be givers; they will no longer be taken advantage of because they show mercy; no, this King has authority to declare mercy for a day yet to come, but today he declares 'Blessing.'

For the pure in heart; for those who only see what's wrong with themselves; who cannot ever seem to pray like they would desire; who would rather take blame and suffer themselves than for others to suffer; hear the Priest who came from and will return to God's holy Place—you *will* see God. But today—now—he declares blessing.

For the peacemakers who end up alone because their warring brothers only desire war, the peacemaking King declares a new inheritance. Your destiny is not endless loneliness because you labor for reconciliation; you will be called a royal child of God. But today—the King declares blessing.

Finally Jesus the Priest-King speaks with direct address to his disciples about suffering. He speaks not only as a priest and king, he speaks as a prophet to future prophets about prophecy. Prophets suffer. Others will revile you, persecute you, speak lies, but remember this is how it goes with prophets. It is not a matter of if, but when, for prophets. As it was with Isaiah, Jeremiah, Hosea, Ezekiel and more, so it will be for those who continually speak about **righteousness**. But hear the paradox you can't comprehend: blessing on you. And for those who continue speaking about holiness and righteousness, rejoice! (said the Prophet-Priest-King), for heaven will be especially rich for you.

² This phrase is derived from the title of Matthew Gallatin's book, *Thirsting for God in a Land of Shallow Wells*.

Next Sunday

You may have heard these Beatitudes and the instructions that follow the sermon of Jesus' "upside-down kingdom." I suppose that is true, in a sense. On the other hand, it suggests our impaired vision, as if this world is right-side up and the kingdom of God is upside down. I think G.K. Chesterton has it the right way round when he writes about St Francis, that great fool for Christ, the juggler who wasn't too proud to stand on his head. Chesterton said of Francis:

He who has seen the whole world hanging on a hair of the mercy of God has seen the truth; we might almost say the cold truth. He who has seen the vision of his city upside-down has seen it the right way up.³

How we need to see the Beauty of God—the Beatitudes—in our time. That is a topic I will address more specifically next week. As we continue our meditation in the Sermon on the Mount, I will have us meditate on what the Sermon of this Kingdom means for us as Americans in light of our political divisions. I don't think it's a stretch to say—no matter your politics—that our world looks a bit upside down.

Which is why we need to read Sermon on the Mount in our time and meditate on the right side up Kingdom. We must be governed by the Prophet-Priest-King Jesus in all that we think, say, and do. Christ summons us to be his witnesses for this time and for this place just as he summoned disciples from Galilee.

The Ordinary People of the Streets

I ask for your prayers and your presence as we prepare for next Sunday. But I wish to leave you with another story of what it looks like to live the Beatitudes, to live the Sermon on the Mount in an upside-down world.

³ G.K. Chesterton, *Saint Francis*, 64.

Madeleine Delbrel was born to agnostic parents in France in 1905 and became a staunch atheist as a teenager, writing a manifesto that began “God is dead...long live death!” She studied philosophy in Paris and lived the life of a fashionable Parisian socialite. But at age 20 her life hit a crisis. Her parents became estranged from one another and her fiancé ended their engagement to become a Catholic monk. She began searching for the God she thought was dead. She read books, sensing she had found God, but when she began praying she knew God found *her*. She heard Christ say to her, “I am the pastor of the flock who has no shepherd and who trembles in the open field.”

Madeleine converted to Christianity when the Great Depression threw France upside down. She moved to a suburb outside of Paris called Ivry, a town thick with Communism. She rejected Communism but not Communists. She moved to Ivry because that’s where non-believers and the poor lived. So she opened a house of hospitality with the support of her Catholic priests and diocese. Madeleine served all neighbors who came through the doors of this house because she believed the Sermon on the Mount required that she recognize every neighbor as a genuine brother or sister. ⁴

Madeleine believed Christians of her time were called to be “missionaries without a boat.” Of her task to bring the blessing of Christ in this upside-down world, Madeleine wrote:

⁴ The best summary of Madeleine Delbrel’s life may be found here: <https://review.catechetics.com/spiritual-life-madeleine-delbr el-french-mystic-and-evangelizer> ; also here <https://www.americamagazine.org/faith/2018/02/01/who-madeleine-delbrel-french-dorothy-day-pope-francis-made-venerable-weekend>

From a sand dune, dressed in white, the traditional missionary overlooks an expanse of lands filled with unbaptized peoples. From the top of a long subway staircase, dressed in an ordinary suit or raincoat, we ordinary people overlook, on each step, during this busy rush-hour time, an expanse of heads, of bustling heads, waiting for the door to open. Caps, berets, hats, and hair of every color. Hundreds of heads - hundreds of souls. And there we stand, above. And above us, and everywhere, is God.

God is everywhere—and how many souls even take notice? ...

Lord, Lord... My eyes, my hands, my mouth are yours.

This sad lady in front of me: here is my mouth for you to smile at her.

This child so pale he's almost gray: here are my eyes for you to gaze at him.

This man so tired, so weary: here is my body so that you may give him my seat, here is my voice so that you may say softly to him, "Please sit down."

This smug young man, so dull, so hard: here is my heart, that you may love him, more strongly than he has ever been loved before.

This is what it means to be a disciple of our Prophet-Priest-King who declared blessing on that ancient Galilean mountain. The beatitudes come right down through the ages into our ordinary lives and our ordinary streets. A final word from Madeleine Delbrel:

We, the ordinary people of the streets, ...don't regard love as something extraordinary but as something that consumes. We believe that doing little things with God and as God does is as much a way of loving him as doing great deeds for him. Besides, we're not very well informed about the greatness of our acts. There are nevertheless two things we know for sure: first, whatever we do can't help but be small; and second, whatever God does is great.... Each docile act makes us receive God totally and give God totally, in a great freedom of spirit. And thus life becomes a celebration. Each tiny act is an extraordinary event, in which heaven is given to us, in which we are able to give heaven to others. ⁵

And that is the very kind of Kingdom the Prophet-Priest-King came to proclaim. And that is the Kingdom to which we belong and with which we have been entrusted, in the Name of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit. Amen.

⁵ Madeleine Delbrêl, "We, the Ordinary People of the Streets),