

June 15, 2008

Again, as we will find with each of the first four beatitudes of Jesus, we are struck by the strangeness of what we hear in today's text: "*Blessed are those who mourn*" – "congratulations to", or "happy are" those who mourn.

It is as odd a suggestion as last week's blessing on the poor. And yet, it differs from last week's verse in that perhaps we can identify a little more readily with those it speaks of. Mourning is different from poverty, in that while relatively few people in our situation have known anything like real poverty, grief and mourning approaches something more like a universal experience.

Mourning has to do with loss, and we have all known loss. It might be a mourning which arises from bereavement, or divorce, the failure of a friendship, a loss of independence due to age or ill health, or perhaps something less tangible like a loss of innocence, or faith. The things we mourn are things which are lost to us permanently. Loss which is temporary is a nuisance or an inconvenience. We don't mourn being sick when we expect to get better, we don't mourn a loss of economic independence when we lose a job but expect to find another. Such losses are merely a matter of waiting, however patiently or impatiently. For the waiting, we expect, will come to an end. But to mourn, in the general sense, is to have lost something for good.

Now, at first appearance, Jesus' pronouncement on those who mourn doesn't seem to have the qualification we struck last week in the beatitude on the poor. Perhaps correcting Luke in an important way, Matthew there had Jesus declare "*blessed are the poor in spirit*" – and drew our attention to a particular but still very real type of poverty which could take strength from the promise of God's kingdom. This correction seems to be lacking in the pronouncement on those who mourn, perhaps because it would make no sense to speak of those who "mourn in spirit"; mourning is surely already a "spiritual" or internal thing.

But the danger of misunderstanding which saw Matthew add the words "in spirit" to Luke's "poor" must also apply here. Just as we have to guard against the suggestion that God simply promises

a total reversal of the economic order, so also it makes little sense to suggest simply that the happy will come to mourn, and mourners will come to be glad. It is not, then, sheer sadness which is blessed, but a *character* of mourning, or a mourning for a particular thing.

What then, is the mourning or the grief which might be blessed? What might be the comfort which could make mourning "blessed". A few weeks ago, in reflecting on Psalm 131 (May 25), I suggested that "Show me Jesus" is the request which lies at the heart of all our reaching for each other. That is, consciously or not, we look to experience the true humanity which is Christ's in our relationships with those around us. We seek the freedom and love for which we were created, and which was perfected in his life.

Just as this is the case in our reaching out for what or who is in front of us, so it is also the case when we mourn something we have lost. We say again, or pray again, "Show me Jesus", but now in a different sense – one relating to a restoration of something which has been lost and which made us who we are, or were. It is not Jesus *per se*, Jesus the dusty-footed Nazarene we are after, but Jesus *risen*. This needs to be made a little bit clearer. We don't seek Jesus there, to hold our hand. We seek to experience what Jesus experienced – restoration of what has been lost, the possibility of life out of death. Mourning is overcome not by religious comforts but by the impossible taking place: finding again what had been lost forever.

To look for Jesus in our grief is to look for death *overcome*. For Jesus, risen and restored, was not a mighty demigod for whom death was a mere rite of passage but a man who really died, and was lost: one who was *mourned*. For Christian faith, the place of grief and loss is that foot of the cross, for the life and love and freedom we had seen in the thing we've lost is truly lost – hanging dead, for all to see *as dead*. There is no blessedness here; Good Friday is an utter disaster for Jesus, and for those who lost him, just as the loss of a child or spouse or our independence or our good reputation might be for us.

But to pray to "see Jesus" in our loss is to understand him not only as lost, for that we

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already know. It is to pray for confidence that what is lost forever might be found again, in God. This is the crux of the Easter event – that one who cries out in his experience of abandonment by God and all those around him nevertheless comes to discover himself to be embraced by God again. This restoration becomes the basis for a restoration to his friends, and the turning of mourning into joy.

In our text from Paul today (Romans 5.1-8) we heard that “while we were yet sinners Christ died for us”. A problem with this way of describing our salvation in Christ is that it seems to have the whole event taking place somehow *external* to us: here we are, there God is, and over there Christ is, dying and reconciling. We *can*, of course, say with Paul that “Christ died *for* the ungodly”. But perhaps we help ourselves in understanding if we amplify this by saying that Christ dies *because of* the ungodly, or that Christ dies *with* the ungodly. The important point is that this death is a death which takes place on account of the actions of particular people, and is the same death those people will die. But even more than this, Jesus’ death is also a kind of death of those very people who crucified him, at the very moment he dies, for at that point he and they are separated, and what freedom and love might have been in their common future is now lost. The Easter *resurrection* event, then, is not merely a miracle believed by the disciples merely to have “happened”, but an experience of grief overcome – indeed the first step in their own deaths being overcome.

Unlike as I suggested last week with respect to

poverty, we do not pray for mourning, for it will surely come our way. We all know the cessation, and the separation, which is the cause for mourning. But we might pray for a new way to experience grief. A new way to mourn is to experience the shadow of loss in the light of the loss-and-restoration of Jesus, and the grace of God which offers this loss and restoration as a promise of our own restoration in his love.

This is not to deny death, but to relativise it. The sad hearts who are called blessed are they who, in their sadness, hold that grief will not be without end. Rather, to borrow again from Paul today, such mourners find an unexpected strength in their sadness, a hope which produces endurance and character, a confidence that the love spoken of in the gospel is sure and will not disappoint us.

Blessed indeed are such as these, happy and to be congratulated, for here is the possibility of seeing through the gloom, life *before* death and in the very face of death.

May all God’s people find themselves blessed with such hope, for our own greater abundance in life, and to the glory of God – Father, Son and Holy Spirit. Amen.

QUESTIONS FOR REFLECTION

- *What have been sources for mourning in your life?*
- *How easy do you find it to understand grief as a being “at the foot of the cross”?*
- *What might “seeing Jesus” mean for grief you have experienced, or still hold?*
- *In what sense, if any, have you found comfort in the promise of comfort, such as this beatitude announces?*
- *Are there things for which you have grieved, but later learned to consider or value differently?*
- *To whom, in your circle of family and friends, might this word of blessing be a comfort?*