

June 22, 2008

"Blessed are the meek, for they shall inherit the earth".

This, of course, is the opposite of the way things seem actually to operate; the "earth" is a place the possession of which is taken by brutality, and not by meekness, or humility. And so any sense of a *call* to meekness or humility causes a problem for most of us, for if it were something we were to *strive* for it would involve a giving up of a right to the exercise of *power* – or at least a particular *kind* of exercise of power. With powerlessness comes the grounds for fear – the fear that others might dominate us, or hurt us – and none of us likes to be afraid. The effect of fear is paralysis – a freezing and diminishing of our present because of what we imagine the future might hold.

Now, there *is* indeed a fear implicit in Christian humility, but one of quite a different type. Later in Matthew's gospel we hear Jesus declare, "Do not fear those who kill the body but cannot kill the soul; rather fear him who can destroy both soul and body in hell." (Matthew 10.28). "Fear" is perhaps not the best way to characterise our positive relationship to God, but the point is well made. In fact Jesus says this in order to build up to a positive exhortation: "Are not two sparrows sold for a penny: Yet not one of them will fall to the ground apart from your Father. And even the hairs of your head are all counted. *So do not be afraid*; you are of more value than many sparrows" (10.29ff). The humility of the Christian disciple is not a matter of disengagement or fearfulness, but in fact a kind of fearlessness before the world, in God.

Who, then, are the humble, or the meek – and yet also the fearless? As with our reflection on the blessing of the poor in spirit, we strike a problem here, for Jesus speaks of a character of heart which cannot be contrived. As with each of the first four beatitudes, here the blessing is upon those who exist in a particular *condition*, and not upon those who have acted or achieved something in particular. To declare ourselves meek or humble, on the basis of what we have done, is to prove that we are not, in fact, meek or humble. In assessing our own humility, we find ourselves in the realm of the opposite of humility – the temptation which is self-righteousness.

Who, then, are the meek who "inherit the earth"?

Those who make no judgements about themselves. *Are there* such humble ones – men and women who do not merely *look* "meek" but who live without fear? The gospel's answer is that there is at least one, and his name is Jesus.

Yet we must unpack what this means, for humility is not simply a particular person but a way of living in the world and – Jesus implies – a way of living we might share in. In his little book on the Christian ethic – and pacifism in particular – John Yoder notes four options which were open to Jesus in his ministry, and which are open to us in our lives today,¹ four ways of being and acting as

The humility of the Christian disciple is not a matter of disengagement or fearfulness, but in fact a kind of fearlessness before the world, in God.

God's counterpart in the world. The first option was accommodation. This was the option taken by the "Herodians" – those who, for the apparent security of the treasured religious traditions,

agreed to accommodate or put up with the indignity of being subject to foreign rule. The second option was that taken by the Zealots. These were somewhat like our modern day freedom fighters – perhaps even terrorists – who valued the cause for which they struggled more highly than their own lives. The third option was simply to withdraw from the wider society. This option was taken by the Essenes and similar groups which withdrew to the desert to establish a new type of community, purified in its devotion and life together. The fourth option was a kind of withdrawal *within* the wider society. This was roughly the approach of the Pharisees, who remained within the city and yet were quite ascetic in their practice and could be quite superior in their attitudes to those around them.

Each of these ways of being a believer has considerable strengths, and the potential to touch lives and move "the cause" forward. Each of these approaches could be characterised as being the practice of a humility or a fearlessness. And yet none them is complete. The one who "humbly" bends and accommodates gives up part of the truth. The one who "fearlessly" presumes to strike on God's behalf simply proves that violence is the way to truth and that, perhaps, vengeance is not God's after all. The one "humbly" denies himself the luxuries of the city by withdrawing to the desert denies those others

¹ Yoder, J. H. (1977). The original revolution. Essays in Christian pacifism. Scottdale, Pennsylvania, Herald Press, 18-32.

of God's children the comfort of the holy in their midst, and denies himself the possibility of God's speaking to him through that wider community. The one who "fearlessly" aspires to a higher "righteousness" in the midst of depravity establishes herself as the presence of a judgement on all those around her. Here humility approaches weakness, and fearlessness approaches arrogance.

Yet in the person of Jesus we see what we might be tempted to call "balance", but which is much more profound than that. As closely related to each other as breathing in is to breathing out, we see in Jesus a humble accommodation of the political situation of his time,² and fearless challenge to the establishment.³ We see a withdrawal from the bustling crowds⁴ and a willingness to embrace the unrighteous around him.⁵ This he does because the world belongs to God, and God to the world. In Jesus we see a humility takes the world seriously, but does so from the perspective of God's love for the world, and God's continuing work in the world. Humility gives up the right to a *vengeful* or *self-justifying* exercise of power because it trusts that God wants to set things right, and will set things right. As such, humility involves a scepticism about *our* capacity to bring about change – the real, long-lasting, humanising change we so desperately long for.

And yet, the humble person is not passive. If we call Jesus "humble", we can scarcely mean by that that he did nothing. There is much the one who aspires to meekness can and must do. Power must still be exercised, and actions taken, but now in a different spirit. It is here that the dimension of humility I've called fearlessness is important. Fearlessness can be simply arrogance – indifference not only to consequences in the world ("those who kill the body") but to consequences before God ("he who can destroy both soul and body in hell" – cf. Matthew 10.28, as above). The call to humility, the call to live without fear as Jesus lived without fear, is in fact the call to strive after justice and righteousness for all, in the knowledge that righteousness and justice are in fact a *gift* (cf. Matthew 5.6).

² Matthew 12.17: "Give to the emperor the things that are the emperor's, and to God the things that are God's."

³ Matthew 23.13-29: "Woe to you, scribes and Pharisees, hypocrites!"

⁴ Matthew 14.13.

⁵ Matthew 9.10f: "Why does your teacher eat with tax collectors and sinners?"

To put it differently, the humble life, or the life without fear, is the *free life*. We are free to do the very best we can and let that be it, for we believe that what we need will be *given* to us. The humble are free to "sin boldly", to borrow from Martin Luther, because they believe all the more boldly that God will make good of their faltering efforts. This is not a freedom we often see, or experience in ourselves. It is easier to hedge our bets by striking a balance, or to presume all knowledge and so the inherent righteousness of our words and actions, or to withdraw or elevate ourselves for fear of attack or contamination. But this is not the way to healing and life, for ourselves or for the world around us. If God *is* indeed graceful and just,

and if indeed we stand by the righteousness of Jesus Christ and not by our own efforts, then we might trust that it is indeed the humble who will inherit the earth and possess the kingdom of heaven.⁶ We would then be free to be wrong, or right, as the circumstances would have it. We would then be free to be weak or strong, as the context determined.

Unto *this* freedom in humility let us, then, dare to pray for the gift of meekness, and commit to doing our best to act humbly until that gift is given. Just so, will we glorify the God who blesses the meek and the lowly, and discover the true source of our humanity.

⁶ What Jesus announces in this beatitude seems to be both similar and different to the first of the beatitudes (5.3): *Blessed are the poor in spirit, for they shall inherit the kingdom of heaven*. "Humble" and "poor in spirit" both seem to be pointing to the same type of character, yet the one is said to possess the things of heaven, and the other "the earth". For Matthew, however – and we should also say, for Jesus – this distinction does not hold. Jesus will teach his disciples to pray, "your will be done, on earth as it is in heaven"; and at the end of this gospel he will proclaim that he has been given "all authority in heaven and on earth". While this sounds to our ears like two quite different spheres which are added together for the sake of completeness, they are actually rather more closely related than this. The point of the gospel of the incarnate God is that heaven *meets* earth – or the earth *becomes* heaven, the place where God reigns. The meek or the humble, then, are promised not so much a piece of ground, or a political sphere, but an inheritance of God himself – the "reign of heaven".

QUESTIONS FOR REFLECTION

- *Who has impressed you with their humility? What did this humility look like?*
- *How is Jesus meek?*
- *What does humility feel like?*
- *What difference might a personal desire for greater humility in yourself make to your attitudes or behaviour? What positive steps can you take to see this happen?*
- *Where might meekness make a difference in the world?*