

The beatitudes: What are they? What is their spiritual and theological significance? These are the questions this essay will seek to answer. The beatitudes occur twice in the Gospels, in Mathew (5:2-10) at the beginning of the Sermon on the Mountain and in Luke (6:20-26) which is frequently referred to as the Sermon on the Plain¹. The version in Luke contains four beatitudes as opposed to eight in Mathew. Luke's beatitudes are accompanied by four curses which parallel his four beatitudes.² The principle difference between the beatitudes of Mathew and Luke is that Mathew is focused on the spiritual development of the community³ whereas Luke is concerned with the social justice within the community⁴. This essay will examine the spiritual and theological significance of Mathew's beatitudes. This leads to the question: What is beatitude?

Beatitude is a form of blessing which proclaims happiness/joy to an individual or group who affirm a particular virtue or action.⁵ Beatitudes occur in the Old Testament literature, particularly in the books of the Proverbs, the Psalms and Isaiah⁶. An example from the Psalms is found in Psalm 112, "*Happy are those who fear the Lord, who greatly delight in his commandments. Their descendents will be mighty in the land....*" Psalm 112 shows the general form of a beatitude. The beatitude starts with a blessing "*Happy are those*". It then relates the blessing to the affirmation of a particular virtue or action "*who fear the Lord, who greatly delight in his commandments*". It then articulates a specific joyful outcome, "*Their descendents will be mighty in the land....*" This pattern is repeated in Proverbs (3:13-14), "Happy are those who find wisdom and those who get understanding, for her

¹Neil J. McEleney, "The Beatitudes of the Sermon on the Mount/Plain", *The Catholic Biblical Quarterly* 43 (1981) 1-13

²John Peter Van Kasteren, "The Eight Beatitudes" *The Catholic Encyclopedia*. Vol. 2. New York: Robert Appleton Company, 1907. <http://www.newadvent.org/cathen/02371a.htm>. Accessed 28th April 2012

³*The New Oxford Annotated Bible* ed. Michael D. Coogan, 3rd ed. (Oxford: OUP, 2007) 13NT

⁴The New Oxford Annotated Bible 107NT

⁵Herman Hendrickx, *The Sermon on The Mount* (London: Geoffrey Chapman, 1984) 11

⁶Theodoor C. Vriezen and A.S. Van Der Woude, *Ancient Israelite and Early Jewish Literature* trans. Brian Doyle (Boston: Brill Academic Pub., 2004) 115

income is better than silver...."The unique aspect of the beatitudes of both Luke and Mathew is that they are a series and this is rare in both the New and Old Testaments⁷.

We have established what a beatitude is. But what was the author of Mathew's Gospel trying to convey in the beatitudes? Davis opens his work on the Sermon on the Mount with the statement:

*"Some have found in it a pernicious document which has wrought incalculable harm by presenting an utterly impossible ethic. Others have found in it the finest statement of the highest morality that mankind has known."*⁸

Clearly the beatitudes offer humanity an immense challenge. The beatitudes have influenced Christian writers across the millennium from St Gregory of Nyssa⁹ in the 4th Century to the Bl. John Paul II¹⁰ in the 20th Century. Both these authors draw on the beatitudes as an image of Christ. St Gregory of Nyssa likens the beatitudes to a painter creating an image with each of the eight beatitudes contributing a component of the image¹¹. A *"self-portrait of Christ"*¹². Thus for us creatures made in the image of God, Christ through the beatitudes is providing humanity with a portrait of what we should be. From this perspective it is totally understandable that some may find such an image confronting and unattainable while others would indeed describe it as the *"finest statement of the highest morality that mankind has known"*.¹³ The spiritual journey the beatitudes invites humankind to undertake is like no other for it beckons us toward the humanly unattainable, the perfection of Christ. St Gregory of Nyssa compares the spiritual journey of the beatitudes to

⁷ W.D. Davies, *The Sermon on The Mount*(Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1969) 10

⁸ W.D. Davies, *The Sermon on The Mount* 1

⁹ St Gregory of Nyssa, *The Lord's prayer : the beatitudes*, trans. Hilda C. Graef (New York: Paulist Press, 1953) 85-175

¹⁰ Bl. John Paul II, "Encyclical Letter Veritatis Splendor" (06 Aug 1993) accessed March 5th,2012, Catholic Document Archive <http://www.catholic-pages.com/documents/17-19>

¹¹ St Gregory of Nyssa, *The Lord's prayer : the beatitudes* 88

¹² Bl. John Paul II, "Encyclical Letter Veritatis Splendor" 17

¹³ W.D. Davies, *The Sermon on The Mount* 1

ascending a mountain at the summit of which God will show his creation a new vision for his creation¹⁴. This analogy of ascending a Mount to receive a new vision has a strong synergy with Moses ascending Mt Sinai to receive the Decalogue. For Bl. John Paul II the beatitudes are the perfection of the Decalogue, a perfection that all Christians must journey toward.¹⁵

Our journey begins with the first beatitude: *“Blessed are the poor in spirit for theirs is the Kingdom of Heaven”*. In the first of the beatitudes Christ is attacking the root of all human evil, the very cause of our downfall, pride. So when Mathew speaks of the “poor in spirit” he is not talking of people who are weak and afraid but those who are courageous enough to imitate Christ’s humility. For Christ *“humbled himself and became obedient to the point of death – even death on a cross”* (Phil 2.8). Thus the Creator of the cosmos humbled Himself to take on human form and accept the most ignominious death imaginable. This is to be the measure of our poverty of spirit, the measure of our humility. No wonder St Gregory of Nyssa warns, *“Let no one imagine that humility can be achieved easily without labour”*.¹⁶ John Cassian, one of the Desert Fathers, teaches that true humility can only be acquired when the ‘inner most’ heart is humble and that the humble person will not be upset by provocation¹⁷. How is such humility possible? St. Benedict in his rule sets out a twelve step process to true humility¹⁸. This is not some simplistic tick-the-box formulation, but an invitation to the seeker of humility to undertake a life-changing journey. The first of Benedict’s steps is to be aware of God, the source of all humility. We must focus our lives on God and simply be aware that the God we seek is aware of us. We must be aware that the God we seek is within us and we need to humbly nourish our relationship with God. Having centred our lives on God, in the second step, Benedict asks to put aside our own will and accept God’s will, *“I have come not to do my own will but the will*

¹⁴St Gregory of Nyssa, *The Lord’s prayer : the beatitudes* 85

¹⁵Bl. John Paul II, *“Encyclical Letter Veritatis Splendor”* 17

¹⁶St Gregory of Nyssa, *The Lord’s prayer : the beatitudes*88-90

¹⁷John Cassian, *Conferences*, trans. Colm Luibheid (New York: Paulist Press, 1985)192-193

¹⁸*The Rule of St Benedict*, ed. Timothy Fry (Collegeville: The Liturgical Press, 1982) 32-38

of the One who sent me" (Jn 6:38). The next step is to except the wisdom of others, to realise that we are not the font of all wisdom and we must accept outside authorities. In our world which reverberates to the mantra of personal freedom, such an acceptance of authority is counter cultural but nevertheless a necessary step to true poverty of spirit. In the fourth step Benedict calls for *"obedience under difficult or unjust conditions"*, thus calling on the seeker of "poverty of spirit" to imitate Christ who accepted the unjust judgement of the Jewish/Roman authorities that lead to his crucifixion. If we wish to be truly humble we must confront the injustices of life and learn from them, not simply brush them aside. The fifth step calls for us to be totally honest with ourselves. We must be prepared to own and confess our own faults for when we are totally at ease with all our faults we have the courage to face the world. Having accepted our own faults, the sixth step calls on us to reject status in a classless society that is obsessed with status. Benedict calls on us to accept *"lowest and most menial treatment"*. In modern society this means doing without the latest car or fashion accessory, accepting that enough is enough and living a simple life focused on God. In the next stage Benedict wants us to accept our smallness and our insignificance for in doing so we become kind and gentle toward others. We in fact give ourselves room to grow. In the ninth step Benedict simply wants us to think before we speak to listen and be open to others. Silence is fertile ground for humility and wisdom to grow. The tenth step cautions against laughter that is vulgar and humiliates others. Benedict wants us to cultivate an environment of peace where everybody is treated with respect. In the eleventh step of humility Benedict encourages us to *"speak gently and without laughter, seriously and becoming modesty, but without raising our voices"*. Benedict is simply asking us to know our place in creation and to respect the place of others. In such an environment of mutual respect nobody tries to trample or dominate the other. In the final step Benedict teaches us the true humility is to know the true measure of ourselves and to see ourselves

as Christ see us.¹⁹ Thus the 'poor in spirit' are those who have emptied themselves of themselves and thus able to be filled with the Spirit of God – and inherit the Kingdom of Heaven.

The second beatitude: "*Blessed are those who mourn, for they will be comforted*". The question this beatitude poses is, "What is mourning?" Is Mathew referring to those who mourn at the death of a loved one? Or perhaps as Stuart Blanch argues, "*The Hebrew experience (of mourning) embraced more than bereavement or prosperity. It embraced, in a way particular to the Hebrew people, mourning for sin.*"²⁰ Or are they mourning for a society who rejects God?²¹ These are valid interpretations of what Mathew meant by mourning. Comfort for those mourning the death of a loved one is obvious at a Christian funeral. Comfort for those mourning sin is obvious in God's gift of Reconciliation. However for those mourning for a society which rejects God, is their comfort eschatological? St Gregory of Nyssa offers an insight into what Mathew meant by mourning. He argues that the true meaning of mourning is deeper than simply mourning for sins or the mourning for a society who rejects God. St Gregory²² makes the point that when we perceive true good and then see ourselves as God sees us, as in the final step of St. Benedict's twelve step process to true humility, then we will mourn for our soul. Thus 'mourning' is a natural progression from 'poor of spirit'. In his letter to the Ephesians St Paul encourages the Ephesians who are "*dead through our trespasses*" that they are in a state of mourning because of their sinfulness and to take comfort in God's mercy and love: "*But God who is rich in mercy, out of great love which he loved us even we were dead through our trespasses made us alive together with Christ – by grace you have been saved.*" (Ehp 2:4-5) From this passage we can take consolation that a person who in the humble

¹⁹ Joan Chittister, *The Rule of Benedict* (New York: Crossroad, 2008) 65-75

²⁰ Stuart Blanch, *Way of Blessedness* (London: Hodder and Stoughton, 1985) 96

²¹ Herman Hendricks, *The Sermon on the Mount* 22

²² St Gregory of Nyssa, *The Lord's prayer : the beatitudes* 111

knowledge of their true good mourns for their soul will be comforted in the knowledge of a merciful God for whom all things are possible.

The third beatitude: *“Blessed are the meek, for they shall inherit the earth.”* The question this beatitude poses is what is meekness? Are the characteristics of a meek person as defined in the Macquarie Dictionary *“unduly patient or submissive; spiritless; tame”*? Or is the meekness of the beatitudes something different altogether? St Paul definitely would not characterise a Christian as submissive or tame. As he says: *“Do you not know that in a race the runners all compete but only one receives the prize? Run in such a way that you may win it.”* (1Cor 9:24) This does sound like the actions of a spiritless person. On the contrary St Paul is describing a person determined and totally focused on winning the prize! What then is spiritual meekness which is surely what we must be talking about? Hendricks describes the meek as people who have broken away from their own desires surrendering themselves to God²³. The two key words in this definition of spiritual meekness are ‘desires’ and ‘surrender’. St Gregory of Nyssa offers a similar definition where he equates ‘desires’ with ‘passions’. His cautionary approach however is one of the skilled spiritual directors rather than that of an academic such as Hendricks. St Gregory reassures the reader that God understands the human condition and does not call for us to live a life isolated from our passions but to seek a *“standard of virtue attainable in the life of the flesh”*. St Gregory then demonstrates a wonderful worldly realism by saying: To ask us to live without passions would be like asking a fish to live in the air. Hence in St Gregory’s view the meek person is one who acknowledges their passions but is not ruled by passion but rather takes a reasoned approach to passions of the soul.²⁴ Acknowledging and dealing with our passions in a reasoned way implies a growth in wisdom. Such

²³ Herman Hendricks, *The Sermon on the Mount* 23

²⁴ St Gregory of Nyssa, *The Lord’s prayer : the beatitudes* 102-103

wisdom would emerge in a truly humble person where a calming silence would moderate their passions.

The fourth beatitude: *“Blessed are those who hunger and thirst for righteousness for they will be filled.”* Clearly this beatitude is not concerned with food or drink but for a hunger and thirst for righteousness. Some translations including the one used by St Gregory of Nyssa replace righteousness with justice. This leads to the misconception that this beatitude is referring to civil justice that is fair or the replacement of civil justice with a divine justice. St Gregory qualifies his definition of justice with the word “true” so he talks about ‘true justice’. True justice is more than civil justice that judges each case on its worth. True justice is the justice of God, a justice of infinite mercy and a justice that saves without condemnation. For St Gregory, the person who is hungry and thirsting for true justice is hungry and thirsting for more than fair judgement. They are hungry and thirsting for salvation. Such a person will be hungry for devotion to God and all virtues.²⁵ But what of righteousness? How does this equate to true justice? St Peter describes righteousness as the saving power of God: *“He himself bore our sins in his body on the cross, so that, free from sins, we might live for righteousness; by this wounds you have been healed”*. (1Pet 2:24) From this we can conclude that righteousness is a gift from God, a gift that frees us from our sins. Another way to describe righteousness is the saving will of God.²⁶ Only a truly humble person who knows the true measure of themselves and sees themselves as Christ does is capable of hungering for God’s saving will. Such a person will be ‘filled’.

The fifth beatitude: *“Blessed are the merciful, for they will receive mercy.”* The fifth beatitude is the second part of Mathew’s beatitudes. In the first part, Mathew’s beatitudes are quite similar to those of Luke, in that they appear to cover the same virtues although as noted out earlier Mathew is

²⁵ St Gregory of Nyssa, *The Lord’s prayer : the beatitudes* 117-130

²⁶ Herman Hendricks, *The Sermon on the Mount* 25-26

concerned with spiritual development whereas Luke is concerned with the social justice. However from this point on Mathew is unmistakably dealing with the spiritual. Mercy is a prerequisite of justice for without mercy there can be no justice.²⁷ *“Woe to you have neglected the weightier matters of the law: justice and mercy and faith”* (Mt 23:23) But what is mercy? Is it being merciful in judgement? Mercy is more than the concept of a merciful judge; mercy springs from love and is a call to share in the suffering of others. We are called to share in their misfortunes in everyday life. We are called to compassion, *“we need to be submerged in the depths of this life”*.²⁸ The merciful person is not a bystander watching life pass by but an active participant in misfortunes of others. We are called to accept our own smallness and insignificance for in doing so we become kind and gentle toward others. The fruit of mercy is mercy. *“Be merciful as your Father is merciful”* (Lk 6:36)

The sixth beatitude: *“Blessed are the pure in heart for they shall see God.”* On reading this beatitude the 21st century mind focuses on chastity but is that what Mathew meant? A pure heart in this context is a heart that is fixed on God, it's not sinless. It's a person who is very much aware of their own failings and who has accepted them with confidence in God's mercy.²⁹ A person with a pure heart has the capacity to show themselves mercy. St Gregory of Nyssa likens a pure heart to a rusty piece of iron that, as the rust and burnish is removed, starts to recover its original lustre³⁰. Likewise as we start to remove the 'rust of sin' we start to recover our original lustre of the image and likeness of God and as a consequence, we start to get a mere glimpse of the world as God sees it. A world that is full of compassion and hope.

The seventh beatitude: *“Blessed are the peacemakers, for they will be called children of God.”* One of the misconceptions with this beatitude is that peace is understood either to be the absence of war

²⁷ Michael H. Crosby, *Spirituality of the Beatitudes* (New York: Orbis Books, 1981) 140

²⁸ St Gregory of Nyssa, *The Lord's prayer : the beatitudes* 130-138

²⁹ Herman Hendricks, *The Sermon on the Mount* 29-30

³⁰ St Gregory of Nyssa, *The Lord's prayer : the beatitudes* 149

or a in the context of a person who is at peace with God. A peacemaker will surely work to bring about the end of war and such a person will truly be at peace with God. However, the meaning of this beatitude is much more than these two concepts. The key to understanding this beatitude is the concepts of peace and peacemaker. Peace is fundamentally a loving disposition toward our neighbour.³¹ In peaceful environments individuals, families and nations flourish because fear is banished. The motto “peace through strength” is absolute folly as it implies that peace can be obtained through fear, the fear of retribution by a strong foe. Such a peace is doomed to be shattered by war. Peace is dependent on everybody being treated with respect and immersed in love. Clearly mercy and justice are prerequisites for such an environment. However humility is a key component of a peace as a truly humble person threatens no one and cradles all of creation in a loving embrace. Peace is a fundamental Christian characteristic, “the fruit of the Spirit is love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, gentleness and self control”. (Gal 5:22-23) As Christians we are all called to be peacemakers which effectively means we need to speak out in support of peace, not just on the world stage but everywhere peace is threatened in the home, in the workplace and most of all within our self. As Thomas Merton said we must speak out against the hypocrisy of governments who print: “Pray for peace” on stamps while arming for war!

The eighth and final beatitude: “Blessed are those who are persecuted for righteousness’ sake, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven. Blessed are you when people revile you and persecute you and utter all kinds of evil against you falsely on my account. Rejoice and be glad, for your reward is great in heaven, for in the same way they persecuted the prophets who were before you.” This last beatitude leaves no doubt about the cost of discipleship. If the previous seven beatitudes painted a self-portrait of Christ, the final beatitude clearly spells out the cost of following Christ. For people who follow the beatitudes challenge society in the most threatening way possible by holding up a

³¹ St Gregory of Nyssa, The Lord’s prayer : the beatitudes 159

mirror to it and by their example they amplify society's faults making them impossible to ignore. Not only that, they offer a clear alternative which is obviously better but requires radical change, a change so radical, so threatening to the status-quo that, as with the Old Testament prophets, society will rise up against the proponents of such radical change.

We have seen that the message of the beatitudes is for us to become more Christ like. The beatitudes clearly articulate what it means to be Christian. A Christianity that is rooted in radical humility, as opposed to radical fundamentalism. A Christianity that calls us to empty ourselves of ourselves, and thus be able to be filled with the Spirit of God – and inherit the Kingdom of Heaven.

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