

TRANSFORMED THINKING, TRANSFORMED LIVING

Matthew 5: 1-12

What kind of world do you and I live in? How would you describe life in this world? For some of us life may be just great much of the time. But for many others, life in this world may be more like, as the father of modern psychotherapy Sigmund Freud described it, a place where: 'obscure, unfeeling and unloving powers determine people's fate'. Or there's always political philosopher Thomas Hobbes who described life as: 'nasty, brutish & short'? Or maybe Buddhism has got it right when it begins its four noble truths with the statement that: 'life is suffering' and life's challenge is to overcome such suffering through detachment and enlightenment for those able to attain it.

But I think there is both truth and untruth to these more pessimistic ways of looking at things. For however much life in the world can be a difficult affair, it is also a means to experiencing and sharing love in terms of relationships. It is a place of meaningful learning, working and growing, where some of us have enough food to eat, shelter over our heads and clothes to wear. Many of us also have some means toward entertainment and leisure, enjoyment and laughter. Many of us also receive care in our times of illness and time to rest in our exhaustion. These are all good things and not reserved simply for the elite few. So then, to characterize life in the world simply as tough and unforgiving, with little in our choices to make any difference, is overly pessimistic.

On the other hand, there is a cloud that hangs over our lives in terms of circumstances or situations beyond us, random happenings that we cannot foresee or control as much as we would want to. Think about what is happening in Ukraine, for instance. Think about all the gun violence and mass shootings. Think about the repealing of freedoms and progressive laws in the US and the chill it sends to those in other nations of the world. Think about all our extreme weather events. Think about the high cost of living which cuts into life's enjoyment in significant ways for many. Of course, much of this is connected to people in power making bad decisions and serving particular agendas, and wealthier peoples of the planet creating pollution and accelerating global warming like never before in our history... And yet the world has always been a place where good and bad has been mixed together. And too often, it is the poor, vulnerable and marginalized who have been affected the most negatively because they have not had the resources to build safer, healthier and more protected lives.

And it is into such a world that Jesus came, and it is to such a world that he addressed his beatitudes. 'Blessed are you', he says, and he includes a variety of types of people in this category of the blessed. In the original Greek, the word for blessed is *makaroi*, and it can also be translated as 'fortunate.' 'Fortunate are you,' Jesus says. But who is it that is

fortunate or blessed according to Jesus' thinking? Is it the well to do and the healthy, those with status in the world and good investments. Are those who are blessed, those who have never had to deal with relationship conflict or breakdown, the loss of employment or the loss of health? Are those who are thought of as fortunate those who have many friends and few enemies, many talents and achievements, and few failures and regrets? Funny, but Jesus doesn't give us the answer we expect. Quite the contrary. Jesus gives us the answer we would least expect. In fact, Jesus gives us an answer totally opposite to what we would naturally think.

According to Jesus' thinking, those we would think are the least fortunate and the most cursed, are characterized as the most blessed and supremely fortunate. How can this be explained?

Well, obviously Jesus is thinking in categories of truth and reality different than our own. Indeed, Jesus is telling us that our view about reality and the truth about the way things are, is not his view, nor is it the deepest truth of things as he envisions it. And in order to glimpse something of what Jesus may be getting at, let me paraphrase in my own words these opening statements to his sermon on the mount which we call the "Beatitudes" or "Blessings."

Blessed are the humble and down-to-earth, rather than those who are arrogant and full of themselves. They have the key to entering God's kingdom, indeed, they already have a foot in the door.

Blessed are those who are free to weep tears because they know how precious is the life that is lost, rather than those who are incapable of tears, or escape and deny every negative feeling or reality in the world. It is they who will receive true comfort.

Blessed are those who are not greedy for more but are happy to care for the earth and share its bounty with other fellow inhabitants. They will receive their share and more.

Blessed are those who are passionate about what is right and are prepared to commit themselves to its pursuit in their personal lives and in society. They will experience true fullness.

Blessed are the merciful who see their own imperfections in the failings of others. They alone will experience true mercy.

Blessed are the sincere, honest and authentic of heart. God will find them and they will experience God.

Blessed are those who advocate and pursue the difficult path toward peace in their personal lives and in the world around them. They will find a peace beyond what this world can give them.

Blessed are those who are wronged for doing good, not for doing harm. They deserve to be vindicated.

Blessed are those who remain firm in aligning themselves with the good, even when they are criticized and vilified because of it. They are in good company, for the prophets and saints have gone this way before them and are now celebrating in the fullness of God's love.

Let me say a few more things about the beatitudes before we conclude. Notice how the word 'Blessed' is not in the future tense. Even though there is a future blessing that is promised, it is clear that according to Jesus, living according to the beatitudes already brings with it a certain kind of blessing here and now. Even though it is not the obvious things that people see, the kind of blessing that is experienced goes deep and grows deep inside the heart and soul of a person. Peace is not just an external thing, for instance, nor is it the mere absence of conflict. Rather, it is an internal thing above anything else. What would any of us give for a greater experience of inner peace?

And what about love? How many of us would want to love more freely and fully, without getting offended or put-off, or frustrated and irritated so much of the time? Or which one of us would not want to have the kind of energy and courage that moves towards righteousness and justice, that seeks God and the good passionately, that is prepared to face external losses of money and reputation but is grounded in a certainty and fullness within that brings an intense kind of inner joy?

This and more is the promise of the beatitudes. We must meditate on them and study them, allowing them to find root in us and grow in spite of the weeds in our lives.

Finally, some may criticize Jesus and the beatitudes because they seem to lack a concrete, practical basis for changing society and the world. Yes, we can make a difference here and there, but the world hasn't changed all that much, and for every person of principle there are five others who are willing to dilute the rule of love if it serves their interest. So why bother? Or how do we keep on keeping on with genuine hope for a better tomorrow?

Well think of young activists like Malala Yousafzai advocating for women's and girl's education around the world, or Greta Thunberg leading a movement for more dramatic global climate action, or here in Canada: Autumn Pelletier calling on our government to speed up infrastructure upgrades and clean drinking water on indigenous reserves. Or think of young activists for the LGBTQI+ community or Black Lives Matter... It's not about making

more money or living comfortable lives. Meaning, fullness and even joy comes from being in the middle of the fight for change or quietly supporting change for many of us, for our world is a project God has called us not to give up on, and the beatitudes offer us a wonderful spiritual manifesto.

If we want to spend the rest of our lives focussing on something that will truly make a difference in our lives, may we meditate on the beatitudes. And may we find not only the challenge in them, but genuine fullness and peace through them too...

Prayer: Awaken us, O God, ground us, O God, and grant us the kind of fullness and peace Jesus promises when we seek to take up his challenge in the ways available to us... Open the doors of our imagination and courage... Amen.