

The source of divine joy

Matthew 5:1-12

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1. In the beginning

At the beginning of the Sermon on the Mount stand the Beatitudes. At the beginning of each beatitude, as we read it in English, stands a word for divine joy, happiness, blessedness. Jesus is in fact announcing an 'Ode to joy' for those who will listen.

Maybe we should ask who these are who are filled with joy, and why them, and how come? And maybe, is there room in their company for us too? These words are not addressed to the crowd beyond, but to the disciples themselves. This is not a great manifesto for all people, but for the gathered few who have heard his call and belong to him.

In Greek, the word is 'makarios'; when it is translated into Latin it becomes 'beatitude' and in English you may read it as 'blessed' or 'happy'. Most modern translations use the word 'blessed'; one or two opt for 'happy'. People don't have to be amongst the faithful to use 'blessed', for many people will say that their lives have been blest, they were blest with children and so on. Yet the word in the New Testament has such strength that it seems to burst out. One writer says of it:

"Oh, what divine joy is here!" and he says that it should have an exclamation mark after it. Barclay wrote of it as *"a joy untouchable, beyond all the 'chances and changes' of life"* (Luccock p.54)

It was a word that the early Greeks saved for their gods, as being the truly blessed ones. You can still find that sort of meaning in the Macquarie dictionary on 'blessing' — something from God. So we should see that it means much more than 'happy'. Happiness depends so much on mood swings and we talk of the 'happy hour' happy talk, and happy days are here again. Certainly it is better to be happy than sad? Do you really think so? We'll come back to that.

2. Who are Blessed?

Given that some have this extraordinary joy, this blessing, this makarios in their lives — who are they according to Jesus? This is where things begin to be stood on their heads, where the tables are reversed, and strange claims are made which get to the core of our being.

No it's not the fat cats; no it's not the great industrialists, and the so called 'shakers and movers'; it's not the powerful nor the political, nor the hosts of talk programmes on radio or TV. The poor are not mentioned much at all these days except in a few vague statistics needed by governments from time to time. None of these are highflyers. The blessed in this case, are right down to earth.

"Blessed are the poor in spirit, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven." Luke in his sermon on the plain simply says 'the poor'. One commentator on this passage spends a great deal of space discussing God's 'partiality toward the poor', ie, God is on their side.

There is a long tradition in the Old Testament, through the judges and the prophets, of seeing the 'poor' as the humble, even broken people, who in their distress hold to God. That may well be what is meant here: "people whose outward circumstances force them to look to God for everything, but who also receive from God the gift of the spirit (faith) to look to God for everything" (Schweizer:Matthew.pp.86-7).

Why can they be filled with this divine blessing of joy? Jesus tells them they have the future: *Blessed are the poor in spirit, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven.* Sure it is in the future, but its not just pie in the sky by and by. The kingdom has a strange presence here and now, for we are already living by that light, being guided in that way, knowing that glorious hope when the kingdoms of this world are become the kingdom of our God and of his Christ. . . . the peace of that realm is already in our hearts and minds.

Is it better to be happy than to be sad? Jesus says, **Blessed are those who mourn, for they will be comforted.** And what are we to make of that?

Jesus does not attempt to answer whether it's better to be happy or sad. What Jesus says to us is whatever the reason may be for being sad, God is there for us. God will comfort us, renew our

strength and help us to face life again. This is a promise which calls us to faith, to acknowledge God's presence and to receive God's makarios, joy, even in the midst of grief and bitterness.

Blessed are the meek, for they will inherit the earth. (NRSV) OR (TEV) **Happy are those who are humble; they will receive what God has promised.** Humble and meek mean basically the same type of non-assertive character — and this too is a matter of faith: they have no need of power for the mighty God is for them, who then can be against them?

There are of course those who are hungry and thirsty for righteousness; the merciful; the pure in heart; the peacemakers; the persecuted. We should not imagine that those described in these sayings are different people, for they are all qualities which can apply to just one person.

And that raises the question — does it mean the community of Christ, or is it really modelled on Christ himself? I think the answer to both questions is yes. Yes, Jesus stands behind what he says, and yes, it is a kind of pattern or vision for the life of his people. It is true here and now, as many people can testify, that 'makarios' the divine blessing of joy inexpressible, which the world cannot give, nor take away is given to such folk as we are thinking about.

Let's hear this extract from 'The cost of discipleship' by Dietrich Bonhoeffer: "**Having reached the end of the Beatitudes, we naturally ask is there any place on this earth for the community which they describe. Clearly there is one place, and only one, and that is where the poorest, meekest and most sorely tried of all men is to be found — on the cross at Golgotha. The fellowship of the beatitudes is the fellowship of the Crucified**".

When we have confidence in God we will find that underneath all the surface of life there is a great peace and a great joy. We no longer worry about tomorrow and what it may bring, because our God is the God of all our days, good and bad.

God will always be there for us, not always to extract us from situations, but maybe to suffer with us and for us. In that process we find that not only do we hold to God — however shakily, but that God holds us in a grip which cannot allow us to be torn from the divine love. That is what the Sermon on the Mount tells us in its first few verses.

This treasure of the Gospel Christ gives us, calls us to commit to him, to journey on with the guidance of the Spirit and finally to know the sheer unadulterated joy (makarios) in the blessing of God: the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit, for ever and ever.

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