

From Proton to Eschaton
Epiphany 4, Year A
Matthew 5: 1-12
30 January 2011

A recent film “The Last Station” tells the story of Russian novelist Leo Tolstoy’s flight from home, and subsequent death in the waiting room of a railway station. So great was his fame that journalists from around the world camped outside waiting for any skerrick of news that might come from the deathbed scene-taking place in such unusual circumstances.

Tolstoy’s fame was based not just on having written “War and Peace” and “Anne Karenina,” but also because he had in effect started a new religion. It was a religion shorn of revelation, mysticism and any doctrine of God, which majored on high ethical ideals and standards of behaviour. He was very keen on the Sermon on the Mount, and wanted his followers to turn the Beatitudes into a charter for living without bothering about the God bit. This message resonated with quite a few, and in fact there was a community of idealistic believers in this new creed living in a commune on his estate.

The trouble with this demanding creed is that it takes perfect people to truly live by the Beatitudes, and the super human effort required to do so is just about impossible unless you have a lot of help from elsewhere, from dare I say it “God.” Indeed Tolstoy himself, a passionate man driven and divided by a number of conflicting desires, struggled unsuccessfully to live by his own ideals, as indeed most of us do. It was this, together with his deeply unhappy marriage that caused him to fly the coop in a short-lived attempt to escape for a while from the pressure of his own contradictions. The Beatitudes have exercised this kind of ambivalent fascination on many, including orthodox Christian believers. It holds before us such an attractive way of living, while at the same time leaving us nonplussed about how we might go about turning it into a reality in our lives.

In the middle ages they coped with this challenging text by arguing that there were two standards of Christian behaviour, the depressingly average of most of us, and the perfect Beatitude driven standard as exemplified by Monks and Nuns. They were the A team who showed it could be done if you went for broke, and who won great spiritual benefits for the B team as a result of their intercessory prayers on the their behalf.

The protestant reformers wouldn’t have a bar of this, and approached the text with a grim realism about human behaviour. Knowing the impossibility of living like this, yet knowing that this is the standard God sets, we are driven to our knees in penitent submission in which

we cry out to God for mercy and help. So the point of the Beatitudes is to kill off our pride and human self-sufficiency, to get us to abandon any attempt to get ourselves right with God as a result of a self-improvement project, and thus to inculcate the right attitude of trusting faith. We are justified by faith and not by works, and the Beatitudes get us into the right frame of mind to get on board with this as the centrepiece of the Christian religion.

Personally this goad to right belief approach doesn't resonate with me. I want to give a positive valuing to the Beatitudes that avoids the pitfalls of all that I have mentioned before. The Beatitudes don't work as a body of ethical teaching removed from the rest of the Christian faith. If you do that you end up with a grim moralistic cult, which was what Tolstoy created. And if you say it's the high standard in a two standard version of Christian living then most people will give up any attempt to take them seriously as a cornerstone of Christian existence.

What I find helpful is to look at the Beatitudes and to say this is a description of who I am on the road to becoming, this is a portrait of what the Christian community will look like when God has fulfilled his purposes for us, this a thumb nail sketch of the life of heaven. In reading the Beatitudes that way I am not removing them in to the future in such a way as to distance them from any need for us to attempt to try and live like that. For it is the very nature of the Christian future fulfilment, what we call eschatology, that it isn't just a goal towards which we are heading. It is also a resource breaking in to the present to reshape the current and developing reality of all those who are open to its transforming power. Our eschatological hope both draws us towards it, while at the same time sending traces of its future glory in to the present in small instalments that both provoke hope and inspire present change.

This means that in taking the Beatitudes seriously I don't have to fall in to the depressing trap of trying to make them happen in me by trying to pull myself up by my own bootstraps, by my own unaided efforts, with the inevitable and morale lowering failure that would follow. Instead I humbly and confidently trust that this is the pattern of Christian character that I am growing into, providing that I remain open to the power of Christ and the Holy Spirit as they reach in to my life from that fulfilled future that we call heaven. There can be no doubt that this growth in grace will require moral effort and the disciplined search for holiness. But this will be assisted growth, encouraged and abetted by the Word and the Spirit. And this will be a growth path that takes account of the possibility of failure and backsliding from time to time, and with that the necessity of penitence and forgiveness.

But the really important thing to get a hold of about the Beatitudes is that they are a gift from God, a state of life and a way of being that are bestowed on us from the future. God does not require that which he will not give. He intends to bring all this Beatitude reality to pass in our lives by a kind of Divine transfusion process.

We might remember also that often people who are at the bottom of the heap, the broken hearted, the discombobulated, and those who have fallen off the world, can be more open to a breakthrough into Beatitude living than the sleek and the successful.

I am going to finish with Eugene Peterson's "The Message" version of what we have been thinking about because his paraphrase draws this dimension of the Beatitudes out:

You're blessed when you're at the end of your rope. With less of you there is more of God and his rule.

You're blessed when you feel you've lost what is most dear to you.

Only then can you be embraced by the One most dear to you.

You're blessed when you're content with just who you are – no more, no less. That's the moment you find yourselves proud owners of everything that can't be bought.

You're blessed when you care. At the moment of being "care-full," you find yourself cared for.

You're blessed when you get your inside world – you're mind and heart – put right. Then you can see God in the outside world.

You're blessed when you can show people how to cooperate instead of compete or fight. That's when you discover who you really are, and your place in God's family.

You're blessed when your commitment to God provokes persecution. The persecution drives you even deeper into God's kingdom.