

Re-imagining the Kingdom in the time of Global Trauma

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South Yarra Community Baptist Church
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Gospel Text: Matthew 5: 1-12 (NIV)

5 Now when Jesus saw the crowds, he went up on a mountainside and sat down. His disciples came to him, ² and he began to teach them. He said:

³ “Blessed are the poor in spirit,
for theirs is the kingdom of heaven.

⁴ Blessed are those who mourn,
for they will be comforted.

⁵ Blessed are the meek,
for they will inherit the earth.

⁶ Blessed are those who hunger and thirst for righteousness,
for they will be filled.

⁷ Blessed are the merciful,
for they will be shown mercy.

⁸ Blessed are the pure in heart,
for they will see God.

⁹ Blessed are the peacemakers,
for they will be called children of God.

¹⁰ Blessed are those who are persecuted because of righteousness,
for theirs is the kingdom of heaven.

¹¹ “Blessed are you when people insult you, persecute you and falsely say all kinds of evil against you because of me. ¹² Rejoice and be glad, because great is your reward in heaven, for in the same way they persecuted the prophets who were before you.

There are many different ways to enter the Holy of Holies and different ways to approach worship and the Sacred Texts. For example, some people come to worship with their bodies, but remain pretty absent throughout, often leaving untouched by the whole experience. Others go to Church because guided by a sense of duty and responsibility, expecting instruction on how to live their lives. And then there are those who long for an emotional experience, for a sense of connection with others and God, that might help them bear their daily life.

I wonder what posture you have brought to worship today and if you would be open to pray with me that you might not leave the same way you came in. That by God's Spirit and your own desire, you might be touched and inspired to recommit your life to the building of the kingdom, a kingdom which requires a *particular disposition of the heart, and an uncommon way of being human.*

As I prepared for worship today, I had that kind of experience myself. It was unexpected and somewhat frightening ~ but profound enough to make me seriously ask myself: in light of all that is happening in the world right now, inside and around me, what do these Blessings mean to my life and faith journey? *What kind of role am I called to play in the bringing about of the kingdom? Am I even fit for it?* And so it is my hope that as you journey with me through the nuances of the text, you might begin pondering similar questions and consider *cultivating a way of being* that indeed leads to a new life on this earth now, as one day shall be in heaven.

The theme emerges very clearly in this text that Jesus' countercultural proposition, to both Jewish law and Roman rule, and his vision of the 'righteous' kingdom is centralized on changing the unjust conditions of the poor, the lowly, the sick, the oppressed and the chronically dislocated individuals and communities of his time.

His declaration of Blessedness on the meek, the mourners, the peacemakers, the persecuted and the pure of heart, affirms that the very conditions that create discomfort, struggle, suffering and even scorn, *paradoxically are transformed into the essential ingredients to inherit and inhabit the kingdom of God.* When Jesus 'declares' existence is freed from its static condition and is loosened up to become a vehicle of blessedness for others.

It is possible that at this early stage of his ministry, Jesus was in his own process of formation and had not yet figured out all the details of the new divine plan. So *Jesus sought to affirm rather than prescribe the essential qualities for constructing the Kingdom of God.* Looking around at those who had had the courage to follow him up on the

mountain, he tapped into the realities that were obviously present, alive and active in the lives of these first followers and he declared them good/blessed/essential to bear the presence of the Divine. I would like to suggest that it was because of these qualities, because of their existential realities, that these people were drawn to follow Jesus in the first place. And could this possibly mean that the idea of the righteous kingdom of God was not an abstract ideal, poured out from Heaven, but a possibility, which *grew and developed* as Jesus looked around and *saw clearly* the situation of those who had chosen to follow him? Could we venture to say that Jesus' identification with the suffering of the lowly and the dejected of his time helped generate the idea of a just kingdom, based on the power of his love and compassion for them and their predicament?

Mind you, this could not have happened, unless Yahweh, the distant God of the prophets, had chosen to descend into the reality of human experience and history, to radically alter its trajectory. In the person of Jesus, God enters the condition of brokenness, of vulnerability, of abuse, of poverty, of exploitation, of ethnic profiling, of racism, slavery and of chronic injustice; and because of this intimate experience of shared humanity the possibility of a new covenant begins to emerge – a covenant, which is now weaved with the threads of divine love, compassion and solidarity for the human condition.

Later in the Gospel accounts, the vision of the kingdom is prospected as a sprouting seed, as a fisherman net, as fresh yeast, as hidden treasure, as a valuable pearl ~ spreading, opening, leavening, infecting, attracting, multiplying. But at this early stage of Jesus' ministry *the kingdom is presented as the space of disruption where the misfits, the rogues and the afflicted will find a space of embrace and a place of belonging.*

I wonder if any of us in this moment can truly identify with the needs, longings and expectations of these first disciples, who risked persecution, imprisonment, death, or at the very least ridicule and dejection – just for being Jesus' followers? I wonder if

we could claim that our faith and life mission are aligned with these foundational qualities of kingdom people, embodied in the figures of blessedness of Jesus' speech?

So much time, progress, technology, discoveries, innovations and regrettable church history separate us from the early disciples, from those who were declared to be blessed in their meekness, filled with grief yet comforted, poor in spirit, persecuted and thirsting for justice and yet capable of seeing God right there in their midst. And yet, we should really be able to empathize with the plight of this community of disciples, since we live in a world that is not much different from theirs. We also have a globalized economy and great disparity of wealth, where few benefits and many starve. We also live in a continuous state of war over things, resources, borders and principles, and they generate unprecedented dislocation of individuals and communities, who on their desperate journeys towards survival and stability, become easy prey of all kinds of exploitative practices -- including sex, organs and labor trafficking. To top it all off, there is the current pandemic and the exasperation with systemic injustice, which are fueling a culture of fear, defensiveness and terror; and throwing the entire human community in a state of collective trauma.

If Jesus was to climb up on a mountain today, ready to teach and to 'declare' his blessings, I am sure He would include those who are protesting against racism, those who are enslaved in the sex industry, the undocumented migrants exploited in the fields, children stuck on the US/Mexican border, those who seek refuge and find death on the Mediterranean sea, those who have lost identity and country and are reduced to the nakedness of their bare life. I am sure He would also declare the Earth blessed, and mourn Her efforts at reclaiming the right to exist and flourish.

Maybe you and I would figure in this list. Or maybe not. Caught up in our own egocentric form of Christianity and lifestyle, *maybe we are NOT among those who mourn this grave predicament; maybe we are NOT joining the protesters who demand justice; NOT practicing and promoting peace; NOT acknowledging our poverty of spirit and humbling ourselves before God, wishing to be named among those who will inherit the*

kingdom. Perhaps we are NOT being authentic disciples of Jesus, but practicing a culturally comfortable form of Christianity, which considers us blessed rather when we hold on to power, privilege and wealth, and quietly support the *status quo*.

If we do not feel any sympathy or identification with the figures of the Blessed described in Jesus' speech, perhaps it means that we are not really fit to usher in, nor inherit, the kingdom of God.

What a sad possibility that would be ~ to remain indifferent and excluded, when God is showing us the path of redemption.

Yet: the Gospel text returns to us, promising it would be GOOD NEWS, offering us a chance to become worthy to be called children of God and fit for the kingdom – both as individual disciples and as the body of Christ, especially when we don't feel fit for the task, particularly when we don't seem to deserve it, and most certainly when we confess that we have intentionally mis-construed the whole notion of Blessedness and aligned with the oppressors.

And this promise can be fulfilled today. Jesus' performative 'declaration' makes us fit to be God's children, and in the hearing and receiving of these words into our hearts we can indeed be made so. Every time we hear the power of Jesus' words, every time we choose to identify with the ones he declared Blessed, we are actually and potentially made 'so.'

Every week, I spend a full day at a summer school program designed for women who work in prostitution in the Red Light District of Amsterdam. About 45 women have signed up and attend faithfully, eager to learn and to connect with each other. The "windows" in which they work have been shut down due to the global pandemic, and so they have time now, time to experiment doing something else. Perhaps for the first time in their lives, some of them can experience being a student, in a classroom, where the intent is for them to receive civil, social and cultural education, to build

their sense of belonging in the country in which they live and work. The day at summer school goes really fast, with a ton of learning and many opportunities for connection and friendship over the cigarette and coffee breaks. A full day in this space, however, is both deeply fulfilling and powerfully demoralizing. In the presence of these women, young and old, from Eastern and Southern Europe, Africa, and South America, some friendly some guarded, all somewhat wounded and all extremely resilient, I experience an interesting range of emotions. By comparing myself, my life choices and mostly my life opportunities, I can feel very lucky and privileged and also very sad and disturbed, my genuine desire to connect with them often interrupted by my need to protect myself from their life experiences, which are to me unbelievably shocking and traumatic.

Despite many years of pastoral experience, what I discover over and over again is how difficult it is to bear the presence of people who are somewhat afflicted, and who carry the marks of suffering in their eyes, in their postures, and very clearly on their bodies. Most of them, I am sure, don't feel oppressed or trafficked and believe they freely chose to come to the Netherlands to do 'sex work' – which is how prostitution is considered in legalizing countries. And yet, I often have to contain the potential eruption of my emotions, so not to embarrass them and myself. Within a pastoral posture of compassionate attunement, I can accurately assess that what I pick up is all the tears, grief and suffering they cannot afford to express. I mourn for the lives they didn't get to live, for the limited choices available to them, for the opportunities they were not granted. But then I show up for the summer course, with a heart full of love, with something to teach them, and with the trust and hope that new opportunities and new beginnings are always available, for them to grasp and pursue – or not.

In my roles as professor of pastoral care, trauma counselor, and anti-trafficking advocate, I am constantly exposed to individuals and communities, who could well fit the list of those figures whom Jesus considered 'Blessed'. Activists, peacemakers, anti-trafficking practitioners, pastors, political refugees, economic migrants, women

in prostitution and victims of all kinds of traumas and exploitations share a particular space of vulnerability and precarity – not much different from the one the first disciples inhabited in Jesus’ time. Deep within my heart, no matter how happy and fulfilled I feel, there will always be a small tear, caused by the pain I have seen and the suffering I have committed to bear witness to.

I love my work and I acknowledge that it has been a source of great mourning as well. With time I have learned to embrace this sense of chronic grief as an essential part of my spiritual journey and a crucial ingredient in vocational formation.

As I connect with the experience of the people I work with, whose realities often appear surreal, unbearable and unsustainable, I realize that paradoxically, in God’s perspective, they embody the condition of precariousness, which makes them fit for the kingdom. Indeed, it is they who are considered Blessed, they who will inherit the kingdom, who will be comforted and called righteous, and who will see God. And I am the one who needs to be disciplined, over and over, into the art of humility, peacemaking and the pursuit of justice.

The German theologian Dietrich Bonhoeffer once wrote that sharing the human journey with the most vulnerable enables us to become the kind of Kingdom people Jesus declares Blessed. He writes: “To learn to be a disciple is to learn why we are dependent on those who mourn or who are meek, though we may not possess that gift ourselves.”

Dear sisters, brothers and friends, all of you who are participating in this worship service today, hopefully open to the transforming power of the Gospel: let us remember that the promise of Jesus’ declaration has the power of shaking us at the very core of our being. It has the transformative potential to ‘make’ us into people who do not live by principles and abstract morality, but who choose to take on the qualities of vulnerability and dislocation, which are characteristic of the kingdom.

May we indeed *become* worthy of Jesus' declaration, genuine witnesses of the disruptive qualities of God's righteous kingdom.

May we take the courage to embody that form of *uncommon humanity*, which Jesus came to model and Bless within us.

And may we learn to recognize and affirm the Blessedness of those who need our presence, our support, our alliance, our compassion, our shared humanity, and most of all our love, so that *together* we can construct and inhabit the kingdom of heaven.