

“Fightin’ Words” – Mt 5:1-12 – Jan 30, 2005

It’s getting rough out there, isn’t it? While scanning through the channels the other night I paused for a moment on a local newscast that was reporting how a house in a neighbourhood over on the Island received four gunshots in the early hours of the morning, and then another whole fusillade a couple of hours later. The neighbours who were interviewed were kind of excited (“I play a lot of video games, and those were definitely gunshots!”), but also a bit shook up. I think the occupants were too shook up to be interviewed – perhaps they’ve already moved!. It seems it was a simple case of mistaken identity – according to the neighbours the current occupants are quite new to the building, and definitely not the kind of people you’d expect to be involved in violence. However the previous occupants were apparently a group of young men who seemed to be involved in shady dealings – I believe the expression is “known to the police”. Yes, it’s getting rough!

There seems to be a great deal of anger out there, anger that quickly erupts as rage. I believe one key reason for that rage is that we are starting to reap the effects of a social change begun in the late 60’s or early 70’s. That era was the beginning of a powerful shift in attitudes taught to children from “know your place” to “your opinions and wants are at least as important as anyone’s”. There were good reasons for implementing that shift, not the least of which was to de-legitimize violence against children, but it seems as though it has introduced a different kind of problem. It seems that more and more people are now extending that shift in attitude from “my opinions and wants are as important as anyone’s” to “my opinions and wants are more important than anyone else’s” to “I shouldn’t have to give way for anyone”, a shift that provides motivation and fuel for the increasing rage we see today. We are all too familiar with road rage – truth be known we even contribute to it, whether it’s the minister drag racing on Denman, or the Hospital Visitation Team slowly crawling up Davie! Consumer rage is on the increase as well. I think we are starting to see signs of pedestrian rage also, and who knows what’s next? Church rage? I hope not! Can you imagine the greeters in flak jackets?!

Our reading from Matthew this morning is the start of a section called The Sermon on the Mount, and I can never think of these passages without both thinking of rage and giggling. I suffer from this bizarre combination of rage and giggling because one of my favourite popular interpretations of theology is that wondrous Sermon on the Mount scene from the Monty Python movie, The Life of Brian. For those of you who are not Monty Python fans (and please, for those of you who are, please try to refrain from quoting your favourite lines out loud while I review here!) the movie Life of Brian is a bizarre comedy based on a fellow named Brian born in Bethlehem at the same time as Jesus. There are many wonderful scenes in the movie that display a profound understanding not only of the Christian faith but of people as well. None, however, in my view can compare with the scene at the Sermon on the Mount. In a classical opening interpretation of our gospel passage, we see (at a distance) Jesus teaching the gathering crowds, who assemble and quietly listen in rapt absorption to his words, “blessed are the meek...”. The scene focuses in on Brian and his wife at the edge of the crowd. Because of the distance they can’t hear too well, and there’s lots of loud whispering ... “blessed are the cheese makers?? what’s so special about them?” Others in the crowd try to

hush them, and of course it all escalates, insults about big noses are thrown, and finally violence erupts as punches are thrown. And that for me is the defining moment, when we hear Jesus working in a calm voice through the “blessed are ...” phrases while this common brawl erupts on the edge of the crowd. What a contrast, what a powerful interpretation and understanding, what irony!

I love that scene, because the contrast shown so well there is at the heart of understanding this complex passage of scripture. There is a popular kind of familiarity with this text, or perhaps over-familiarity because it is one of those sections that is so often misquoted. “Blessed are the poor...” is probably the most popular of the misquotes, I’m sure we’ve all heard it expressed that way. However, the text actually says, “blessed are the poor in spirit ...”, a considerable difference. One can be filthy rich and still be poor in spirit. If we rephrase it, “blessed are the dispirited, the downtrodden, those who are unloved, ...” it begins to make more sense.

And yet even if we get past the popular misquotes, there are still some curious questions raised by the specifics. “Blessed are the meek, for they shall inherit the earth.” “Yes, after the powerful are done with it”, today’s cynic might respond. More troublesome than even that cynical world view, however, is the way some zealots use that particular statement to abuse individuals by suppressing them and holding them down. There are enough complexities in this short passage that there is probably at least a complete sermon on each individual “blessed are ...” phrase.

However, I think it’s also important to take this section of text as a whole. To begin, this section is itself an introduction, and like all good introductions both sets the tone of what follows, and provides a summary of the following themes as well. The tone it sets is one of controversy, which should be no surprise given the rest of Jesus’ ministry. With his “fightin’ words” confrontations against the scribes and Pharisees who would abuse the people, his whip-flailing, table-overturning attacks on those who would abuse the church, his challenges to all who would listen with his familiar “you say ..., but I say ...”, Jesus proclaimed constantly that the foundational values, indeed the whole reward system of the kingdom of God are not only different from but opposite to the values of human society. Grace instead of grabbing. Compassion over competition. Mercy, comfort, righteousness are the rewards to those who seek the kingdom of God.

“It’s not easy”, you might be thinking, and I agree with you. It’s not easy. In fact, it’s even tougher than it first appears. At first glance it would seem that we could use this text as a list of ways to behave. There is kind of a ‘cute’ interpretation some do with this text, calling it the ‘be’-attitudes, a play on the unofficial title of the section. The idea was that we are here given a list of attitudes to become, or ‘be’. I have some problems with that approach - for example “blessed are those who mourn”. I’ve met some people, and I’m sure you have too, who are almost professional mourners in the faith, who try to spread their gloom and pain to all around them, and I’m pretty sure that that’s not what Jesus had in mind. Quite the contrary, Jesus specifically exhorts us to “rejoice and be glad”.

Or how about adopting the “be-attitude” of being “poor in spirit”, or dispirited, in order to claim the kingdom of heaven – that just doesn’t seem right, does it, and it certainly doesn’t fit the more attractive call to “rejoice and be glad”.

This text is not a list of ways to behave – but what then is it? This message is an invitation, an opening, a welcome. To be sure, plenty of instructions on how to live

follow – indeed we will be looking at some of them over the next few weeks. But this section on blessings is an introduction to those instructions. Interesting that blessings would precede instructions, but it's not the first time it happens in scripture. Recall that in Exodus the Ten Commandments are preceded by a reciting of the way God blessed Israel by leading them out of Egypt. God's directives are expressed in and surrounded by blessings, by grace. The obedience that will be outlined following this section must be understood as a response to the blessing of grace, not as an effort to gain God's favour. Hear the words – “blessed are those who”, not an urging to be this or that.

Jesus offers to his listeners here, including us, a message of comfort and hope in a world that is not always a great place in which to live. Jesus called to those crowds, and calls to us today, greeting us in the conditions in which he finds us; conditions that are a result of living life. Bruised, confused, hurting, dispirited, weary, sad, tired, discouraged – these are the all-too-common rewards of life. Not that it's all bad, or all negative, or all horrible, because much of life is great, but we all do have our scars and discouragements. We can consider ourselves rather blessed though, for many in this world have little experience other than of pain, hunger and hopelessness.

Jesus introduces his teachings with a reminder of the blessings to be received in the kingdom of God. And that's the real blessing and miracle of grace, isn't it? Instead of one more set of impossible hurdles blocking entrance into the kingdom, here is Jesus offering a message of encouragement, proclaiming that the broken, the weary, the heavy-laden, the mourning, the downtrodden will be lifted over any obstacle by him, the Christ. The strong, the powerful, the grasping and greedy, those who would climb over the backs of the weak or shoulder them aside have no need of, or promise of receiving a blessing from God in Christ – that blessing is particularly for those of us who need the help, the assurance and re-assurance that the kingdom of heaven is not only available but promised to us.

Some of the blessings are for the here and now, and I'm confident that most of us can testify to having received them. Jesus has walked with us when we have mourned, and wept with us, and comforted us, and He still does. When we have been discouraged and dispirited, Christ has uplifted us, and continues to bring us peace and strength. How much more promising then is the realization that all of these blessings, and yet even more than could be counted, await us as we enter into the kingdom of heaven? It truly is a wondrous thing, that in our belief in Christ we can answer the question, “are you blessed?” with a joyful, “we are truly blessed, indeed!”