

Beatitudes 4: BECOMING RIGHTEOUS

Matthew 5:1-6, Romans 9:30-10:4 [MW17-24]

Sermon preached by Rev Wayne Thornton at Mangawhai and Wellsford, Sunday 13 August 2017

A man is lost in the desert – exhausted, hot, dying of thirst

- sees a man, crawls up to him: “water, water”
sorry sir, I have no water. Perhaps I could interest you in a tie?
- man stumbles off
sees another man, barely gets the words out: “water, water”
sorry sir, I have no water. Perhaps I could interest you in a tie?
- man almost done for but keeps going
finally, amazingly, the man sees a hotel
thinks it's a mirage, but it's real, staggers to the door
- just inside in the foyer man can see a pool with a fountain
as he moves to go inside, doorman blocks his way:
sorry sir, I can't let you in, you're not wearing a tie

In this week's beatitude the key is 'hunger and thirst'

- in the Palestine of Jesus' day people knew only too well
what it was to be hungry and thirsty
- a working man ate meat once a week if he was lucky
and he and his family hovered on the border of real hunger and actual starvation
- no ordinary person had clear cold water pouring into their house
water was a valuable commodity that was not always at hand
- on a journey a person might find themselves in the midst of wind and sand
parched and with an unsatisfiable thirst

William Barclay writes:

... the hunger which this beatitude describes is no genteel hunger which can be satisfied with a mid-morning snack; the thirst of which it speaks is no thirst which could be slaked with a cup of coffee or an iced drink.

Fortunately the vast majority of us in 21st century Aotearoa New Zealand know nothing of this

- Jesus says we are to hunger and thirst for righteousness
as a farmer in Zambia, a woman in hospital in Yemen
a child in a Syrian refugee camp
- long for nourishing food and clean water

This is what to hunger and thirst for, to be that desperate for: “righteousness”

- so it must be really, really, really important
in which case it is vital to grasp just what this “righteousness” is
 - most of us I guess are familiar with “self-righteousness”
well it has nothing to do with that!
 - any thoughts, ideas, suggestions about righteousness???
- [answers]

The 'traditional' version of this beatitude says:

Blessed are those who hunger and thirst for righteousness, for they will be filled. (NRSV)

here are a couple of other translations:

God blesses those who hunger and thirst for justice, for they will be satisfied. (NLT)

God blesses those people who want to obey him more than to eat or drink.

They will be given what they want! (CEV)

Here's what the dictionary says under "righteousness":

Righteousness is a feeling or way of life that is all about doing the right thing; righteousness shows great concern for morals and ethics. Righteousness may sound like an old-fashioned word, but it is a timeless concept. It is about taking a stand and doing the right thing. Trying to help poor, oppressed people is a cause full of righteousness. Doing an unpopular thing that is ethical requires righteousness.

Plus, we discovered in our Bible study this week

- the righteousness Jesus is on about is not just a personal thing

John Stott writes:

... biblical righteousness is more than a private affair; it includes social righteousness as well. Thus Christians are committed to hunger for righteousness in the whole human community as something pleasing to a righteous God.

This beatitude has as its point of focus

- that while most people have an 'instinctive desire for goodness' this desire is rather wistful and nebulous
- when the moment of decision actually comes these same people are on the whole not prepared to make the effort and sacrifice real goodness demands
- sure it's a nice idea, but ...

So while with good reason Barclay describes this beatitude as the

- "most demanding and indeed the most frightening of them all" there is some good news here too, because it is also in its own way the "most comforting"
- behind it all is the understanding that the one who is blessed is not necessarily the one who achieves this goodness, this righteousness rather it is the person who longs for it with their whole being

Barclay notes:

If blessedness came only to the person who achieved, none would be blessed. But blessedness comes to those who, in spite of failures and failings, still clutch to themselves the passionate love of the highest.

Did you catch that? It's greatly liberating!

- the blessing is not in achieving righteousness, however we understand that the blessing is in desiring righteousness with all our heart and mind and soul with every fibre of our being

But before we can breathe a sigh of relief and relax

- there is one more hugely important point and it is to do with how the Greek is written
- I am not a Greek scholar in any way so I am intensely grateful to those who are and who share their understandings
- so allow me to share what I have discovered about how these two simple lines are written in Greek, and the implications for what Jesus is saying

In the normal rules of Greek grammar regarding hunger and thirst

- "I thirst for water" means this person desires a drink of water
- "I hunger for bread" means a desire for a piece of bread

- in this beatitude, most unusually, when Jesus talks of hunger and thirst it is not a mere drink of water that is desired, but the whole darn tank! not a single piece of bread, but the entire loaf!
- there is a saying you might have come across: “going the whole hog”
- when it comes to desiring righteousness, Jesus says it is lock, stock and barrel

Are you with me so far??? I've been wrestling with this for a week

- and I am only just beginning to get a grasp of it
I think I might have it by the tail, so hang in there ...

Now it seems to me there are two “traps” with this beatitude

- the first is that many people are indeed content with just a part – a drink or a slice satisfied with “partial righteousness” with something being 'good enough'
- in a previous parish, when planning a service or event a friend would say: “that's close enough for jazz”, a variation of the Kiwi saying “she'll be right mate” meaning that will do – it's not perfect, not 100 percent, but near enough to get by
- Jesus says near enough is not good enough
we are to go all out after righteousness in the same way as a starving person goes all out in search of a crust of bread

The second trap is in thinking that achieving righteousness is something we can do ourselves

- that ends up being self-righteous, or something even worse
as we have discovered with the previous beatitudes
it is more about our attitude to God and having our heart in the right place

Paul wrote about this in the reading we heard from Romans

- the Gentiles who made no effort after righteousness nevertheless achieved it
why? because they had faith
- the people of Israel made great efforts after a law of righteousness
but never attained it
why not? because their efforts were based on deeds

Which perhaps at first glance seems somewhat contradictory

- I mean Jesus has been emphatically telling us to hunger and thirst for righteousness
however that is about our *attitude* rather than our *actions*
about our standing before God, how we see ourselves in relation to God
- following a set of rules will not lead to righteousness
that can lead to judgementalism, to *self* righteousness – but never righteousness
- perhaps it's like this: can we desire righteousness? Yes!
can we make ourselves righteous? No!
- what does make us righteous, make us acceptable to God?
Jesus Christ and what God has done and is doing through him, for us

It seems illogical, not to make sense

- if we strive for righteousness, we will miss it
if we receive righteousness as a gift, by faith, we are on the right track
- and we are to desire this gift, this righteousness
as desperately as a drowning person gasps for air

We are to desire it not just for ourselves

- not just for our family, not even for our church, our community, our nation but to desire it for our whole world
- this desiring of righteousness then becomes a doorway through which the kingdom of God shines and by which people may gain a glimpse of what God's kingdom is all about

William Barclay translates Matthew 5:6 like this

O the bliss of the one who longs for total righteousness as a starving person longs for food, and a person perishing of thirst longs for water, for that one will be truly satisfied.

Applying this wider, I think it has to do with us hungering, thirsting, yearning

- for people, community groups, public officials, political parties to operate righteously
- just imagine that we're in the lead up to an election ... just imagine a campaign where all the candidates were motivated by a desire for righteousness ...

I've also been giving some thought to just what the blessing is in this beatitude

- seems to me it will enable a clear conscience and those with this attitude will attract people be a person others rely on and follow
- it means making decisions will be clear because there is nothing 'wishy-washy' there is a straight path because being aligned with God gives direction for life

The Message translation of Matthew 5:6 goes like this:

You're blessed when you've worked up a good appetite for God.
He's food and drink in the best meal you'll ever eat.

A couple of thoughts to take with you to reflect on this coming week: [Slide]

- dietitians warn: Don't fill your body with junk food
Jesus says: Don't eat junk food for your soul
- in the application for this week's study John Stott asks a very "chewy" question: is your appetite for righteousness sharp or dull?

I invite you to take a couple of moments to reflect

- then I will conclude in prayer