

The Beatitudes and social justice

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

Blessed are the poor in spirit, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven. Blessed are those who mourn, for they will be comforted.

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

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

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

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

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

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

Blessed are you when people insult you, persecute you and falsely say all kinds of evil against you because of me.

Rejoice and be glad, because great is your reward in heaven, for in the same way they persecuted the prophets who were before you.

(Matthew 5: 1-12)

Key points:

- People think that the Beatitudes are about social justice;
- Like all biblical texts, the Beatitudes must be read in context;
- The Beatitudes cannot be reduced to a set of social proverbs as they are about the kingdom of God in all its dimensions;
- The gospel is not about social justice – it is social justice.

“Write something about social justice”, said the editor, “and base it on the Beatitudes”. If only life were that simple! Believe me, I have tried, but the biblical texts won’t allow us to impose our demands on them. The history of biblical interpretation is simply littered with examples of the most blatant, even if well intentioned, misuses and abuses of Scripture in order to justify particular doctrines, prejudices or ideologies. Often the most basic principles of interpretation are ignored. In classic post-modern style, we ask “what does this mean to me?” instead of asking what the original writers wanted to communicate to their audiences. Superficially, the Beatitudes have little, if anything, to do with what is commonly referred to as social justice. “Blessed are the poor in spirit,” says Jesus, “for theirs is the kingdom of heaven... Blessed are those who hunger and thirst for righteousness, for they will be filled.” It is hardly a manifesto for tackling crime, drugs or intergenerational poverty, is it? Yet the Beatitudes are frequently employed to give voice to social justice campaigns which deal with precisely those concerns.

Context

“A text without a context is a pre-text”, it is said, so let us look at the setting of this passage. The Beatitudes form part of the first of Matthew’s great discourses, generally known as the Sermon on the Mount. They appear in a slightly different and shortened form in Luke. Indeed, Luke offers only four beatitudes, and these are balanced by four woes.

The public career of Jesus had just begun. In the immediate aftermath of his baptism and time of testing in the wilderness (mirroring the experience of the people of Israel), he introduced the main theme of his ministry: “Repent for the kingdom of heaven is here” (4:17). Then, after calling his first disciples, Jesus went throughout Galilee, teaching in their synagogues, preaching the good news of the kingdom, and healing every disease and sickness among the people (4:23). Presumably as a result of this, large crowds from Galilee, the Decapolis, Jerusalem, Judea and the region across the Jordan followed him. On seeing them Jesus went up on a mountainside and sat down. Then “his disciples came to him, and he began to teach them” (5:2). This last verse is

the key to unlocking the meaning of this passage. The audience is clearly specified as the disciples of Jesus, rather than the wider crowds.

The kingdom of God

The controlling theme around which this material is ordered is that of discipleship, or life in the kingdom of God. The kingdom of God was breaking into planet Earth in a new and radical way through the words, actions and very being of Jesus. God was "returning" to his exiled people through his son, the representative of both Adam and Israel, and offering them the possibility of living truly, enjoying a restored covenant relationship with himself. With deliberate overtones to the exodus story in the background, Jesus was saying that God had seen the suffering of his people and was on a mission to rescue them. The slave master might appear to be the Roman Empire, and the bondage might appear to be the regime to which they were subjugated, but they were simply expressions of the underlying realities of evil and sin. In his ministry Jesus was saying that forgiveness of sins was available and that this meant real deliverance from the real slave master.

New world order

In the Beatitudes Jesus describes what life in the kingdom of God – as opposed to the kingdom of Rome, or Pharaoh or Satan – ultimately looks like. It is radically different from the present ordering of things. It might appear the wrong way up, but actually it is exactly how things are supposed to be, the way God originally intended.

Do the Beatitudes then have anything to do with social justice? Unsurprisingly, perhaps, the answer is both yes and no.

Bias to the poor?

It has been said that "religion is the sigh of an oppressed people". To describe the Kingdom of God in these terms is both true and misleading. Undoubtedly the Kingdom of God message proclaimed by Jesus offered new hope to the poor and downtrodden, as it spoke of a radical change in the present social order, but the qualification for entry into this new state is not poverty but adherence to Jesus and his kingdom message. The poor do not inherit the kingdom of heaven simply on merit of being poor nor are those who mourn comforted simply because they mourn. In the end the gospel is not simply about poor people coming out on top. It is those who acknowledge God as their King who may confidently look forward to the fulfilment of his purpose in their lives.

The gospel is social justice

It has been argued that the Beatitudes in Luke focus on the material and social condition of the disciples rather than the spiritual qualities set out in Matthew. For example, in Luke, Jesus says, "Blessed are you who are poor, for yours is the kingdom of heaven" (6:20) whereas in Matthew he says "Blessed are the poor in spirit, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven." (5:3) Drawing such a distinction between the material and the spiritual, however, is to squeeze the teaching of Jesus through the sieve of our western mindset. The Beatitudes in both versions are about social justice, because the gospel is social justice. The life of the kingdom of God that Jesus describes is a justly or rightly ordered life, politically, economically, socially and culturally. The gospel is all about human flourishing, rightly ordered relationships and rightly ordered social and political arrangements. Jesus said that the kingdom of God belongs to those who recognise their poverty of spirit, those who, in this world, mourn are comforted, and the meek inherit the earth.

So what are the implications of all this?

Firstly, we must firmly resist the temptation to reduce the message of the kingdom of God, the gospel, to the existential comforting of souls. In announcing the arrival of the Kingdom of God, and describing it in the way he did, Jesus was bringing into being a new order and establishing a renewed people of God around himself where every aspect of life was to be impacted by him.

Secondly, we must avoid the trap of thinking that the kingdom of God is either an entirely present or future reality. The kingdom of God is in the process of breaking in. It is present and future. It is here and not yet. We must work for a society where we can

point to signs of the future kingdom of God that is founded on the love of God, neighbour and self - the only loves that truly satisfy. Perfection is not possible but redemption is, and the policies of all political parties need to encourage the most redemptive actions possible in the circumstances.

Thirdly, the Beatitudes must challenge those of us in the affluent west to re-order our lives in order to ensure that how we live and what we value is a reflection of the radically renewed life that Jesus describes.

Further study:

Questions:

What does it mean to be poor in spirit?
How do the Beatitudes challenge our understanding of what the kingdom of heaven is like?

Books:

Rich Christians in an Age of Hunger: Moving from Affluence to Generosity, Donald J. Sider
The Challenge of Jesus, Tom Wright

Weblinks:

www.ntwrightpage.com - an unofficial website dedicated to the Bishop of Durham