“A Text that Ought To Jolt Us”
Matthew 5:1–12
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There are passages of scripture that we find jolting and difficult to understand like the one in which Jesus speaks to a Syrophoenician woman in an ugly way, the part of Psalm 137 where the author asks God to kill the children of his enemies, or the entire book of Joshua which promotes genocide. But there are also passages of scripture we find quite approachable, rather warm and fuzzy even, that perhaps ought to jolt us.

The words we have read today from The Sermon on the Mount, what we call the Beatitudes, fall into the latter category. As one scholar has noted, this text is so well known that when the Monty Python film *Life of Brian* jokes about people far away thinking they hear, “Blessed are the Greeks” and “Blessed are the cheesemakers,” everyone gets the jokes. Everyone knows Jesus says blessed are the meek and the peacemakers, and we assume that it is obvious that he would say these things. They sound like Jesus! But for Jesus’ first hearers and for Matthew’s first readers, these words are shocking.

Many of the sayings have some precedent in the Hebrew canon. Isaiah 61:2 speaks of a chosen one being anointed by the spirit of God to comfort all who mourn. Psalm 37:11 says that the meek shall inherit the land. And Numbers 12:8 speaks of seeing God face to face, though only Moses can do this, and even he isn’t comfortable doing so. But while the concepts are not new, they don’t fit the image of Messiah most have.

In general, people expect a political leader because they yearn for liberation from Rome so as to have possession of their land back, a key element of faith and communal identity. And in Matthew, the previous chapters have prepared the reader, especially the Jewish reader, for a leader like David – this is what Jesus’ genealogy suggests – and one like Moses who speaks from a mountain, handing down sacred guidelines.

So, when Jesus ascends the mountain, everyone expects a word about moving forward with God’s blessing. Now that they’ve got the

right leader, things are going to change! There will be no need to bow the knee to Caesar! But when Jesus starts talking, he delivers a very different message. Blessed are the poor in spirit, those who mourn, the meek. Blessed are those who hunger and thirst for righteousness, the merciful, the pure in heart, the peacemakers. Blessed are those who are persecuted for righteousness.

"Really?" the people wonder, "What is this namby-pamby stuff?" They were expecting a Righteous Rambo! But, as we know, this opening volley of information provides a preview for how Jesus will conduct his ministry all the way to the cross, how God chooses to redeem a world, and thus how Jesus' followers participate in God's new realm.

"Blessed" is a translation of the Greek *makarios*, which means "happy" or "fortunate". The Latin is *beatus* from which we get "beatitudes." But some scholars suggest we might consider the Hebrew word *'ashar* which is translated as "blessed" in Psalm 1. It literally means "to find the right road." Jesus is saying that the meek and poor in spirit, the peacemakers and persecuted, find the right road. They live as God wants them to live, they are the saints of this world.

Sainthood is not a special category of spiritual overachievers, but a way of life modelled by Jesus, and though it does not match anyone's expectation of a Messiah, the Beatitudes provide a picture of this life.

But what exactly does this mean for us? It begins with humility. The poor in spirit find the kingdom of heaven, the meek inherit the earth, peacemakers and the pure in heart are praised. They are all on the right road. Thus, there is no place for arrogance and bravado, aggression and force. It is not the way Jesus proceeds nor is it the path he desires for his followers. Francis of Assisi is the model, not Attila the Hun or even 12th century Crusader Richard the Lionheart.

But just as Jesus' message is not what many in his time expect or want, it is not what many expect or want in ours. Many want a macho Jesus and there are preachers who give them one, like Army chaplain John McDougall. He wrote a book entitled *Jesus was an Airborne Ranger: Find Your Purpose Following the Warrior Christ*. Jesus was no Mister Rogers, he says, he was a real bada__, a forceful man who called

other men to be bada__s! Jesus was a wild-at-heart Ranger on a mission and "You can't spell *Ranger* without the word *anger,*" he says.

As Ryan Newson reminded us recently, Jesus was not always meek and mild, he did get angry, he turned over the moneychangers' tables in the Temple, but he was not a warrior, he was not a Ranger. He laid down his life rather than fight, much to the consternation of his own disciples.

There may be times when war is necessary, there may even be something called a just war, though Pope Leo and many other Christian ethicists suggest the concept needs to be updated to account for modern weaponry or abandoned entirely, but linking Jesus directly to war is a fool's errand. He says, "Blessed are the peacemakers." Strength is not revealed by sheer force. Humility is a virtue, a sign of true sainthood.

So is a relentless yearning for what is right and just in God's eyes. Blessed are those who hunger and thirst for righteousness, Jesus says, for they will be filled. The imagery implies a single-minded focus on sacred matters. It means that all of life is shaped by the desire to know and do what is right in God's eyes, no matter what, no excuses!

And yet, Jesus says *hungering* and *thirsting* for righteousness is blessed. This doesn't imply perfection. Though he says these people will be filled, he doesn't say when, and until that day arrives, ever hungering and thirsting for more is desirable, not settling or thinking we have arrived or know it all. A little humility helps here too.

I think of something Annie Dillard wrote a few years ago. Dillard, one of the saints of our time, died recently, and reflecting on her life, Amy Frykhom recalled these words. Dillard was asked by *The Christian Century*, as many others have been, how her mind has changed over time. She declined to participate, but her refusal was so eloquent that they asked permission to publish it and she agreed. She wrote this.

> I identify as a Christian, but many Christians would disagree that I can use the term honestly.
>
> I can't and don't give intellectual assent to many very-established and agreed-upon Christian dogmas, if not most of them, if not all of them.

> That Jesus of Nazareth is 'the only begotten son of God, begotten not made, God of God, light of light, true God of God' is something I always enjoy saying. But I wouldn't bet the farm on it. I wouldn't render it to Caesar. These are spiritual matters. Their language merely resembles ours. They need not make sense in worldly terms...
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> I know only one thing for certain: there is holiness. Standing there, a person can sing myriad songs. (November 2026, p. 49)

Some might find these words unworthy of the faithful Christian, but there is something attractive in this kind of humility, something that is a driving force in any genuine search for righteousness, something saintly.

So, while it may not be the most natural choice in Jesus' time or ours, we can come to understand the call to humility and the need to seek righteousness throughout our lives. But what about all this talk of persecution? Is it really necessary? In Jesus' time, it was. Standing up for Jesus and his way of life meant trouble for his followers in the Roman Empire. But before we dismiss this part of The Sermon on the Mount too quickly as something tied only to another time or to certain parts of the world today, we might want to think about this a little more.

Do we really think the world around us today is being shaped according to God's design? The hatred and division, poverty and violence, discrimination and persecution? Do we really believe we are doing everything we can to give witness to Christ's way of justice and love, righteousness and peace? And do we imagine that if we were to embrace our calling more fully in speaking up for others that there would be no personal cost, no reprisal?

Early Baptists were sent to prison or put to death because of their insistence on religious liberty. Not only were Civil Rights leaders like Dr. King killed for their advocacy for racial equality, but I have known pastors whose families were threatened, by church members, and whose jobs were lost because they spoke the truth of the gospel. And there are many other gospel concerns which produce hostile opposition to this day, in this culture, even in the church.

I think of these words of Civil Rights leader Fred Shuttleworth included in Andrew Manis' biography of him *A Fire You Can't Put Out*.

> [Religion] ought to have the same thrust that John the Baptist had when he went to tell Herod he was wrong… and when Elijah went to Jezebel… or Elijah when he challenged the 450 prophets [of Baal]. It's 'both/and.' It has to do with your prayer life and your Living life and it also has to do with how you live, whether you Live under oppression. Because it was never God's will, in my estimation… to be the order of the day anywhere… I always remember what Dr. [William Homes] Borders said: 'The book of Acts is an action book. The Gospel will get you in trouble; but God will get you out.' That's a true statement. And if you aren't… running over somebody's feeling, making and overcoming enemies, then it's not the gospel… (p. 220)

Discipleship is challenging, but Jesus does say, "Blessed are those who are persecuted for the sake of righteousness, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven."

This doesn't mean we should seek out suffering or that suffering is *the* defining mark of Christian life. The resurrection allows us to experience joy in every moment of life. It just means that our calling is not always easy. Like the Beatitudes, it jolts us, but whoever said that following Jesus, which is all sainthood is, would be easy?