
Living in the real world: God's new reality

The thread that runs through all of today's readings, suggests that God has a very different set of expectations, a different set of values to the ones we are used to. If we think of Epiphany as a time of startling revelations that reveal God to us in different ways, then this one really does take us out of our comfort zone. The prophet Micah shows us that although our relationship with God is intended for our comfort along the way, it has to result in mercy and love that's directed towards others. At the centre of Micah's prophecy is a trial, where God sits in judgement on the people's actions. Rather than expressing anger, God is disappointed and sad. 'O my people, what have I done to you?', he says. The people keep trying to gain God's favour by offering sacrifices and participating in religious rituals, but God just isn't impressed, and we see that what God is looking and longing for is to find justice and mercy in operation. What does God require, asks the prophet? God requires the people to do justice in their daily relationships; not to just wish for a world that's fair and equal, but to act to make it just. They are to treat one another with kindness, where the Hebrew meaning of kindness goes way beyond our understanding and speaks of love, loyalty and faithfulness. They are to walk humbly with their God; to go on a daily journey with God that's undertaken in the context of relationship.

There is no mystery in the way this reading from Micah has been linked with the Sermon on the Mount. Both say that those who are just and humble and merciful are closest to God. Like much of Scripture, they seem to indicate that God prefers the poor, the weak, the unfortunate; the failures of the world. This of course is troubling because most of us patently aren't weak, or poor or unfortunate, or persecuted. In fact we spend a great deal of effort trying *not* to be failures.

Matthew tells us that the sermon was delivered from a mountain. The people are seated on a hillside overlooking the Sea of Galilee. The view is breathtaking. They can see the city of Tiberias, the River Jordan, and the Golan Heights. Matthew is reinforcing the significance of Jesus' sermon here. Throughout Scripture, mountains are the geographical place for God's revelation and instruction. Remember the

stories of Abraham and Isaac on Mount Zion, of Moses on Mount Sinai, of Elijah on Mount Carmel? Matthew is saying, listen to this, take it in, these things are central to the way we should live as part of God's kingdom.

The Beatitudes don't simply name qualities that will get us an entry ticket to heaven. They point instead to a particular kind of person – a person who is at odds with the *real* world, one who doesn't fit the world's idea of success. They speak of the paradox that the really 'fortunate' are the ones who seem unfortunate now. What an odd thing to be saying - then or now. What on earth is fortunate about being poor?

The problem with sermons of course is that they can seem idealistic and far removed from reality. We often think that sermons need to be practical. They need to speak about things from the 'real world'. But are sermons designed to address us where we are, or is their real purpose to draw our attention to where we could be, to God's expectations of what the world should be.

I saw a school ad recently that claimed the school would 'prepare your children for the real world'. But what is this real world? The ad implies that the 'real' world is fixed and agreed upon. The philosopher Thomas Hobbes famously described reality as solitary, hard, brutish and short. That's a pretty tough analysis. Perhaps the world we think of as 'real' is just a pale imitation of the real 'real' world, the Kingdom of God.

Preaching about the Beatitudes is unavoidably one of those 'unrealistic' sermons. Jesus blesses the poor, the dispossessed, those the world dismisses or curses. He calls us to live in a different way, in a way the real world rejects as impossible and idealistic. This sermon collides with my world, the 'real world', and it shows me a wisdom that I can't find unless someone teaches me, unless it sinks into my soul. This is a teaching that can take us into the new world, God's new reality.

After telling us that true disciples don't lose their temper, and don't retaliate when attacked, Jesus goes a step further and commands us to love those who harm us.

Before I left Canberra, the vicarage at Bega was broken while the rectory family was away. They came home to find that their home had been ransacked, and their car stolen. Then the young man who did the break-in, rolled their car and was killed. The vicarage family were then called on to minister to the family of the young man who died, even though he'd caused them pain. This is the kind of loving we are reading about; loving that goes against the natural grain of our world.

The only motive for this kind of behaviour is theological. It's the nature of God to love those who do evil. Jesus reflected this nature on the journey to the cross, and as he did he gave us a glimpse into the real world, God's new reality.

Few texts are as unreal as this one. Blessed are the peacemakers, we read; blessed are those who mourn, when someone strikes you on the right cheek, offer them your left. If a soldier orders you to carry his pack for a mile, then carry it for two. These sound to us like a recipe for being a doormat, because in the real world, the meek get taken advantage of, and those who are wronged find a lawyer.

If this world really is 'short, brutish and solitary' as Hobbes claims – then there's no end to the mourning and sadness. The best we can hope for is to manage our grief as best as possible. But Jesus promises laughter and joy to those who mourn, blessedness to the victims of injustice, triumph to those who don't repay evil for evil. How? Because Jesus saw a new world coming. In fact, Jesus was a sign of that new world, and of how it could be lived out day by day. He was the first outbreak of the kingdom of God, and the sign that reality - by the grace of God – was making a fundamental shift. Every time we forgive, every time we don't repay evil for evil, we show that we belong to this new world, and a little piece of the future reality – of the 'real' world becomes visible in us now.

The world says, "Blessed are the proud, the self-sufficient, the stoic, for they shall rule the earth."

Jesus says, "Blessed are the poor in spirit; for theirs is the kingdom of heaven."

Who do you believe is right?

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