Blessed?

Matthew 5:1-12

In the first year after I was ordained, I served a little church in a little village in central Victoria, and there were all sorts of difficulties, as there are in all churches and in all villages, but I loved the saints in the church and I loved living in the village.

The church was only able to pay me half the clergy stipend, and the bishop who ordained me created a diocesan position which gave me just enough to pay my rent and keep my car on the road.

That bishop retired within a few weeks of ordaining me and the new bishop decided to terminate my diocesan position.

That left me without enough to live on, and gave me no choice but to leave the little church and the little village only a bit more than a year after moving there, and go to a different part of Australia where there were parishes that could afford full-time clergy.

Not long before leaving, I was invited to preach at a couple of other churches and by an apparent coincidence that meant I had to preach three times within a week on Luke's version of this passage from Matthew – the Beatitudes.

Just when I was poor, grieving and rejected, I was having to preach about how blessed it is to be poor, grieving and rejected.

Friends, I was not feeling blessed! I had some big arguments with God for letting this happen to me.

Has that ever happened to you? Have these very familiar words from Jesus ever come to you at a low point in your life and challenged you to rethink what Jesus might mean when he says those low points are blessed by God?

Since then, I have come to be grateful for that opportunity to deeply embody the Beatitudes – to live and preach them at the same time – to find that what was a horrible time in my life really could somehow also be a blessing.

This is the life of blessing, Jesus says: A life of struggle. A life of grieving and being misunderstood. A life where the good you want to see in the world is always beyond your reach, so that you are constantly striving – always hungry and never satisfied until you arrive, famished, at the great banquet of God's kingdom.

Jesus is saying, "blessed are those who appear to be cursed". Blessed are those left begging on the side of the road while the rest of us drive past in our comfortable cars and don't even notice them.

If people who mourn are blessed,

If people who are hungry and thirsty are blessed,

If people who are rejected and persecuted are blessed,

Then why would I want to be blessed?

Go, bless someone else, we might want to say to God.

Since the assault on Helen Haynes, I have heard a lot of people talk about her as a peacemaker, in her community and in parliament: someone who is better than most politicians at resisting the temptation to attack opponents rather than their policies.

How do you think she would feel if someone told her today that she is blessed?

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Many of us have been disturbed to see the political violence that seems so common in other parts of the world turn up in Australia. A lot of us were already feeling disturbed by the violence and injustice we see in so many places in a planet that is desperately hungry and thirsty for justice. We think of France. We think of Gaza. We think of Sudan. We think of Ukraine.

It can be overwhelming. At times like this, our sense of what God's blessing looks like can be shaken. If we think God's blessing looks like success and victory and life going along smoothly, then it can seem that God is blessing the wrong people.

It can look that way, but this sermon from Jesus turns that upside down.

Blessed, he says, are **the poor in spirit** - the ones who are able to consider other points of view because their own certainly hasn't blinded them to the truth; people who act out of compassion rather than moral superiority. People who are wealthy in spirit - who stand on their moral high ground and shout condemnation at those beneath them cannot comprehend this blessing. But those who take the downward path - to walk beside those who have been condemned - find Jesus on that path with them, and discover that they are enacting the Kingdom of heaven on earth.

Blessed are **those who mourn** – those who allow themselves to weep when they see people suffering, rather than hardening their hearts. I have worked in Christian ministry all my life and have lost count of the people who have told me I need a thicker skin in order to survive in ministry – that I should be less sensitive, that I shouldn't cry so easily, that I should keep my emotions down and pretend to always be calm and happy. Jesus never talks such nonsense to me. Jesus calls us out into a grieving world to weep with those who weep, and Jesus blesses all those tears.

Blessed are **the meek**. Blessed are those who do not demand anything for themselves, but turn up to serve others. Do you remember during Covid when we all discovered that the impressive people with high incomes are, on the whole, not the most useful members of society; but the cleaners, the nurses, the aged care workers, the transport workers, the farmers – they are the ones we really depend on. And for a brief moment we learned to bless them. God blesses them always, and will ensure they receive the good things they have been denied.

Blessed are **those who hunger and thirst for** righteousness – which is the same word in Greek as **justice**. Blessed are those who churn inside because of justice thwarted and denied; those who cannot rest until all injustice is overturned. Blessed are those who protest against laws that are unjust and systems that harm the people they should be serving. So much that is good

about our country has been fought for by people whose hunger for justice drove them out of the safety of compliance to demand that all adults should vote and all children should be educated, and all who are sick should have access to health care. We might occasionally stop taking those things for granted and remember to bless the people whose hunger for justice brought them about. God never forgets them, but ushers them into the kingdom where all hunger for justice is satisfied.

Blessed are **the merciful**. Blessed are those who make mercy such a daily practice that when they are confronted by violence they are able to respond with grace. Blessed are those who turn from revenge and judgment, those who want to see their enemies - not punished but - healed of the brokenness within that led them to cause harm.

Many years ago, when I was recovering in spirit from harm caused to me by some people, I recall praying for them, and seeing in my mind an image of them getting what they deserved from God. The image horrified me so much that the desire for revenge became impossible for me. I have a long way to go in becoming truly merciful, though, especially when I see powerful people cruelly harming millions of people without power. But even then, wouldn't it be wonderful to see those powerful people repent? Wouldn't it be better than revenge to see the cruel dictators of the world turn from death to life – from violence to compassion?

Blessed are **the pure in heart**. Blessed are those who have let go of their need for unnecessary things in order to focus on what is truly important. Blessed are those who can do without praise and respect from people, without power and influence, without the assurance of a comfortable future, without romance, without harmony. Blessed are those who can do without those things because they know God adores them; because they pray and trust God who can do all things; because their ultimate future is in God's loving hands; because their eyes are on a kingdom where all the discordant noise of this world will join in exquisite songs of praise to God.

Blessed are **the peacemakers**. Blessed are those who ratchet conflict down rather than escalating it. Blessed are those who can hold in their bodies and hearts all the stress and discomfort of incompatible needs and unhealed hurts and can hold steady, with both hands held out in friendship.

And blessed are those who go out into the world in all their vulnerability to practice these things and are **met by rejection, false accusation and violence**.

Because that can happen.

We live in an upside-down world that sometimes punishes sincere, empathetic, gentle, just, merciful, pure, peace-making behaviour. It is not always safe to follow the path Jesus leads us on. It wasn't safe for Jesus, so why should we expect it to be safe for us?

In our upside-down world, if we do the right things, expecting to be rewarded, then at some point we will be bitterly disappointed, and we might give up.

If we watch the news expecting the good guys to win and the bad guys to be punished, we will become disillusioned and overwhelmed.

Jesus's words seem upside-down to us, but it is really our world that is upside down.

But if we believe the blessing of God will meet us in our disappointment and disillusionment with our upside-down world, then we might just find the courage to work together to embody the blessing of God for the people around us who are confused, grieving, downtrodden and falsely accused.

We live in an upside down world, where expediency, coercion and competition seem more likely to bring success than honesty, kindness and mercy. Why would we want success in such a world? In such a world it is a blessing to be rejected!

Why would anyone sacrifice their souls for the insipid rewards that our upside down world offers? Why would anyone do that when true blessing is right there for anyone willing to experience the poverty of spirit that opens our eyes to the kingdom of heaven.

Why would you make yourself sick by eating the bread of injustice when you could let yourself feel true hunger and thirst in anticipation of the great banquet of God's kingdom?

Why be a common garden variety sinner when you could be a saint?