

Jesus' upside down message

Read: [Micah 6:1–8](#) [Matthew 5:1–12](#)

These are two very significant and well-known readings.

They are stirring words. Challenging words. Transforming words.

Easily skipped over words.

But how and where does one start to **grapple** with these readings?

The **Beatitudes** form the first part of the so-called Sermon on the Mount that we will be exploring over the next several weeks. In order to hear these words right we need to go back a few verses to hear the **context**. We're told ...

Jesus went throughout Galilee, teaching in their synagogues and proclaiming the good news of the kingdom, and curing every disease and every sickness among the people. So his fame spread throughout all Syria and they brought to him all the sick, those affected with various diseases and pains, demoniacs and paralytics ... and he cured them. When Jesus saw the crowds he went up the mountain, and after he sat down, his disciples came to him [and] he began to speak ... (Matt 4:23–5:1)

So Jesus' primary fame comes as a **healer**, a much sought after person in an era when there were neither reputable doctors nor medical facilities of any kind. And it's in this context of healing that Jesus speaks to his followers and would-be followers.

What we hear first are these strange, upside-down blessings ...

Blessed are the miserable and oppressed in spirit ...

Blessed are those who mourn and grieve ...

Blessed are the unassuming and gentle ones ...

These blessings are designed to shock us and challenge us, because back then – and still today – we know from lived experience that this is **not** how the world works. We know that it's closer to the mark to say ...

Blessed are the rich and self-confident people ... for God is surely looking after them

Blessed are those who laugh and enjoy life ... like on all the TV ads

Blessed are the assertive types ... for they will get whatever they want

So what game is Jesus playing at here? Is he suggesting that we have to become spiritual losers and be walked all over and insulted in order to be blessed by God? This is how the passage is sometimes interpreted, aided by translations that make these stations in life seem more appealing ... so ... blessed are those who recognise their need of God, blessed are those sorrowful at the state of the world ... such **spiritualised** readings attempt to make the passage more relevant to our current sensibilities but I'm not sure it's what Jesus had in mind.

I want to suggest to you a **more likely** reading of these strange words of Jesus. Elsewhere Jesus nearly always teaches using **concrete** and **tangible** examples ... look at the sower tossing his seed around, look at the weeds that sprout up among the wheat, consider a traveller walking down to Jericho who gets beaten up by robbers. Jesus continually draws on well-known real-life examples. Here with the beatitudes it's probably no different.

Remember the context of the passage ... Jesus has been healing all sorts of people from various diseases and afflictions. The common thinking of the time would have gone something like this ... These sick and maimed people have obviously **offended** God in some way to be suffering so severely, they must have **sinned**. Or they're **Gentiles** – non-Jewish people from Syria and beyond the Jordan who couldn't expect to be blessed by Israel's God.

Jesus turns these expectations and prejudices on their head. See that sick person, that poor person over there, even that Gentile person ... they can each be blessed by God. God's kingdom is for **them** just as much as for the rich and successful people. The ones that nobody notices or cares about or who try to keep the peace ... God is blessing even them **through my ministry**. And you know what, when some people criticise **you** for following me and call you nut-cases for following the crackpot preacher from Nazareth, God can even bless you!

This list is clearly not exhaustive. These are **illustrations** of who is welcome in the kingdom of God. So are rich people excluded? No! It's just much harder for them because they tend to rely on their wealth. Jesus will have more to say on this later in the Sermon on the Mount.

It's worth noting that Jesus allows these blessings to guide his ministry throughout the Gospels. Hence Jesus often seeks out and enjoys the company of the poor in spirit – those rejected by mainstream society – people like lepers and tax-collectors and prostitutes.

He mourns for the people of Jerusalem who reject God's ways and weeps over the death of his friend Lazarus.

He shuns popular notions of power and might and violence, but rather extends mercy and compassion to the hurting and outcast.

He seeks justice, peace and reconciliation between people.

And he warns his followers that the cost for following him is high, and may cost a person their life, as was the fate of prophets before him.

In short, Jesus lives out these beatitudes – bringing God's blessing to many regarded as being beyond God's care. And Jesus teaches his followers and disciples to see people in the same way that he does. Hence the great challenge of these words.

It's time to briefly consider the **Micah** passage. Here God is in a heated dispute with Israel and calls them to a mock trial with the earth and the mountains forming the judge and jury. The accusation is simple. God has rescued and cared for Israel for generations but how has Israel responded? With **empty worship** – doing what is required by the letter of the law and the temple system – yet neglecting the **heart** of the law – which is to actively seek justice for the poor, to love kindness and to walk humbly with God. In other words, it's a call to reflect God's character in how we live.

The stern warning from Micah is that these values are foundational and essential – justice, love, kindness and humble reliance on God – they are not optional extras for God's people. We don't get a **choice** between **worship** and **justice**. And even though we may not directly persecute anyone, our society's endless hunger for ever cheaper stuff like clothes or shoes or computers exploits workers in poor countries like Bangladesh, Vietnam or China. And whether we realise it or not, the wars that our troops have fought in in places like Iraq and Afghanistan that has forced people to flee these countries and seek shelter here in Australia means that we are implicated in this injustice.

History of course tells us that seeking justice and transforming society are long and difficult processes. Think of the struggles to end slavery, or to overcome racial discrimination in America – or Australia – or South Africa. The struggle to change the stigmatization and shameful treatment of asylum seekers will be long and difficult – but it's what Micah calls us to as God's people.

If we're serious about following the call of both Micah and Jesus – bringing compassion and justice to the least and rejected – opposing the strong forces of violence, materialism and power – then we may well end up like those described in the beatitudes – rejected, persecuted, and weeping over the state of the world. Does that sound like anyone you know?

... and do you know what happened to him?
... he was mocked and crucified.

As we listen to these words, we have a choice: will we follow and get onboard the kingdom project? Are we prepared to have our values and our life turned upside down for the sake of God's kingdom? If the answer is 'yes' then we will indeed be blessed by God and will inherit the kingdom of God.

I want to close with a Franciscan blessing that reflects the upside down way of God.

May God bless you with discomfort at easy answers, half truths and superficial relationships, so that you may live deeply with in your heart.

May God bless you with anger at injustice, oppression and exploitation of people, so that you may work for justice, freedom and peace.

May God bless you with tears to shed for those who suffer from pain, rejection, starvation and war, so that you may reach out your hand to comfort them.

And may God bless you with enough foolishness to believe that you can make a difference in the world, so that you can do what others claim cannot be done.

Amen.