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All Saints' Day, All Years, BCP I  
November 5, 2006

### **The Beatitudes: Transvaluative Transformation**

Whenever I hear the Beatitudes—the Gospel reading we just heard—I can't help but think of the Monty Python movie, *The Life of Brian*. It has a scene where Jesus is in the distance giving the Sermon on the Mount, of which the Beatitudes are a part. The people in the movie are trying to hear what Jesus is saying, but it's difficult because he's so far away.

At one point the dialogue goes something like this, "I think he said, 'Blessed are the cheese makers.' What's so special about the cheese makers? It's not meant to be taken literally, he's referring to all manufacturers of dairy products."

I mention this because, well, it's funny, but also because, in a humorous way, it shows how easy it is to misunderstand what Jesus is saying, and how we make generalizations—in some cases even doctrine—based upon our misunderstanding of scripture. The Beatitudes, while very beautiful, have to be among the most misinterpreted verses of the New Testament.

There is a tendency to hear this series of blessings as simply good advice—a set of virtues that we should follow to get into heaven—"Blessed are the pure in heart, for they will see God." Does that mean we need to be pure in heart to see God? I hope not,

Jesus' words are not simplistic statements about the way the world ought to be—Jesus rarely says anything that simple. Instead, he is telling us about the very nature of the kingdom of God and of God's new covenant—the "good news"—that the kingdom of God is near, and that we don't have to be dead to be in it.

We often misread the Beatitudes because the Kingdom of God defies conventional explanation. It is not what people 2,000 years ago, or even today, expect. Jesus couldn't describe the kingdom in a few words, so I won't try. But in one sense it is a metaphor for how we should relate with God and each other. These verses are telling us what God values and how those values differ from ours.

The Jews in ancient Judea regarded wealth and power as signs of favor from God. Righteousness was defined by observance of the Levitical laws—making the appropriate sacrifices at the temple, following the rules for diet and cleanliness, that sort of thing. And to most Jews, that was good enough. It was a system that favored the privileged and the wealthy—people who could afford the sacrifices and temple taxes. So when Jesus says people with a pure heart will see God, he shatters conventional standards, and threatens a society and an economy that accommodates the legal system but lacks compassion, mercy, tolerance, and love.

I wonder at times if we've changed much in the last 2,000 years. Our society, too, treasures wealth and power. People flock to churches that tell them wealth is God's blessing. We don't have the same purity codes, but our systems favor the wealthy, and we act as though laws are good enough for dealing with violence, drug addiction, and poverty.

As we grow in our attachment to worldly values, we depend more and more on money and what it can buy. Over time, we start to assess our worth and that of others by what we own, where we live or go to school, what kind of job we have, and whom we know. Net worth, once exclusively an accounting number, becomes a measure of our value as human beings.

The tragedy in all of this is that in our infatuation for material wealth, we often devalue those people who don't have what we do. We treat homeless people with indifference, and alcoholics and people with other addictions as embarrassments. People dying from AIDS or starvation get forgotten or ignored. We look at "the projects" and "trailer trash" with disdain.

The Beatitudes are telling us that in the kingdom, wealth, power, and glory as we understand them are meaningless concepts. God does not value things the way we do. Richness is defined by an abundance of love, not money. Power comes through submission to God, not by controlling people or property. Glory belongs only to God.

Imagine how differently we might choose to do things if we wanted to glorify God instead of ourselves. Or if we measured wealth by how much we love, not by how much we own. God's principal value is love, and when we love generously, we approach the kingdom. That's what the Beatitudes are telling us.

The church, as imperfect as it is, is one of the principal ways we strive to advance the kingdom of God on earth. It is here—through worship, prayer, and our gifts of substance and service--that we grow in our relationship with God and each other. The mission and ministries of the church are among the ways—also imperfect--we follow in Christ's footsteps, continuing his ministry.

You will be getting a letter asking for your pledge to support the mission and ministry of St. Andrew's this coming year, and I'm fairly confident it won't have written on it, "Blessed are the pledge makers." Only Monty Python would do something like that. But pledges of financial support are among the ways we express our commitment to Christ and to the values of the kingdom.

Living in the kingdom—following Christ—isn't easy. But, as the Beatitudes tell us, Christianity starts with love, and when we give without conditions or expectations, we are responding to God's love with our own. People who know that are blessed. They understand that generosity—the kind that God reveals and that Christ teaches—is an act of love.