

The Heavenly Citizens Charter 1

Blessed are the poor in spirit.

Matthew 5:1-12

Everyone who has ever heard of Jesus and knows anything at all of His teaching must surely be familiar with the Beatitudes with which the Sermon on the Mount begins. Their simplicity and their going against the flow challenge have attracted each fresh generation of Christians. The more we explore their implications, the more seems to remain unexplored. Their wealth is inexhaustible; we cannot plumb their depths. 'Truly, we are near heaven here'. So let's begin by asking some questions about them? *Who are the people described here?* The Beatitudes are nothing less than the CV of the balanced and mature Christian Disciple - not eight separate and distinctive groups but eight qualities of the same group who at one and the same time are meek and merciful, poor in spirit and pure in heart, mourning and hungry, peacemakers and persecuted.

This is not an elitist sect within Christianity but Christ's own specification of what every Christian ought to be, every citizen of God's Kingdom. Now please don't run away with the thought that this happens the moment you become a believer: like most things in the Christian life it takes time. After all hasn't that Fruit of the Spirit, Christ's character still got a way to go in you and me? So the people Christ describes are His children, disciples, those who have returned to His family.

So what about the qualities commended: are they spiritual or physical: the question needs to be asked because Luke puts a physical slant on them (Blessed are you poor/ Blessed are you who hunger now). Clearly Christ was not indifferent to physical poverty and hunger but he emphasizes that 'My Kingdom is not of this World' (John 18:36). During the temptations and subsequent to the feeding of the 5000 He clearly rejected a physical even political approach in favour of redeeming the Spiritual fabric of people's lives and of the communities in

which they lived. So the Beatitudes are about a spiritual condition with a spiritual attitude: as the 'Message' translation might have said: *Get some Attitude!*

This is authentic full-blooded Christianity and it has and will continue to change the World. The first four beatitudes are about the relationship of the Christian to God: the second four are about our relationship and duties to others...as ever you just can't avoid the truth that relationship is at the heart of the Gospel.

Blessed are the Poor in Spirit (for theirs is the Kingdom of Heaven): it is to the OT we must go if we are to find the background against which to interpret this beatitude. At first to be 'poor' meant to be in material need. But gradually, because the needy had no refuge but God (Zeph. 3:12 "but I will leave within you the meek and humble who trust in the name of the Lord"), 'Poverty' came to have spiritual overtones and to be identified with a humble dependence on God. Thus the psalmist designated himself as 'this poor man' who cried out to God in his need 'and the Lord heard him and saved him out of all his troubles' (Psalm 34:6). The "Poor Man" in the OT is one who is both afflicted and unable to save himself, and who therefore looks to God for salvation, while recognizing that he has no claim on Him. This kind of spiritual poverty is specially commended in Isaiah. It is 'the poor and needy', who 'seek water and there is none and their tongue is parched with thirst', for whom God promises to 'open rivers on the bare heights and foundations in the midst of the valleys' and to 'make the wilderness a pool of water and the dry land, springs of water' (Isaiah 41:17-18). The 'Poor' are also described as people with 'a contrite and humble spirit'; to them God looks and with them He is pleased to dwell (Is 57:15, 66:1-2). It is to such that the Lords anointed would proclaim the good news of Salvation, a prophecy which Jesus consciously fulfilled in the Nazareth Synagogue when He declared 'The Spirit of the Lord

is upon me, because He has anointed me to preach Good News to the Poor' (Is 61:1 Lk. 4:18). Further the Rich tended to compromise with surrounding heathenism; it was the poor who remained faithful to God. So wealth and worldliness, poverty and godliness went together. That's why the gospel is good news to the poor and today the Body of Christ thrives and grows among those with very little materially.

Thus, to be Poor in Spirit' is to acknowledge our Spiritual Poverty, indeed our Spiritual Bankruptcy, before God (We have had the Credit Crunch now this is the Spiritual Crunch?) For we are all sinners, under the holy wrath of God, and deserving nothing but the Judgment of God. We have nothing to offer, nothing to plead, nothing with which to buy the favour of heaven. As the hymn tells us:

*Nothing in my hand I bring,
Simply to the Cross I cling;
Naked, come to the for dress;
Helpless look to thee for grace;
Foul, I to the Fountain fly;
Wash me, Saviour, or I die.*

This is the language of the Poor in Spirit. We do not belong to anywhere except alongside the publican in Jesus' parable, crying out with downcast eyes, 'God be merciful to me a sinner!' As Calvin wrote: "He only who is reduced to nothing in himself, and relies on the mercy of God, is poor in spirit."

To such and only to such is the Kingdom of God given. For God's rule, which brings salvation, is a gift as absolutely free as it is undeserved. It has to be received with the dependent humility of a little child. Thus, right at the beginning of His sermon on the mount, Jesus contradicts all human judgments and all nationalistic expectations of the Kingdom of God. The Kingdom is given to the poor, not to the rich; the feeble, not the mighty; to little children humble enough to accept it, not to soldiers who boast that they can obtain it by their own prowess. In our Lords' own day it was not the Pharisees who

entered the Kingdom, who thought they were rich, so rich in merit that they thanked God for their attainments; nor the Zealots who dreamed of establishing the Kingdom by blood and sword; but Publicans & Prostitutes, the rejects of human society, who knew they were so poor they could offer nothing and achieve nothing. All they could do was to cry to God for mercy; and He heard their cry. **(Tell Story of Church which throws birthday parties for prostitutes at 1 o'clock in the morning!)**

Perhaps the best later example of the same truth is the nominal Church of Laodicea to whom John was directed to send a letter from the glorified Christ. He quoted their complacent words, and added his own assessment of them: 'you say. I am rich, I have prospered, and I need nothing; not knowing that you are wretched, pitiable, poor, blind, and naked.'(Rev3: 17) This visible Church, for all its Christian profession, was not truly Christian at all. Self-Satisfied and superficial, it was composed (acc. to James) of blind and naked beggars. But the tragedy was they would not admit it. They were rich, not poor, in spirit. Mary in her song affirms that 'God sends the rich away empty' (Luke 1:53). So are the *Poor in Spirit touching the hem of St Andrews? I hope so. And what are they finding when they do? Judgment or Grace. Being as Little Children is perhaps a rhema word for St Andrews at this moment for some of us seem to have forgot how to do that and seem to have ignored the visual aids God has placed in our midst: wake up Church and be that Grace Community that the Beatitudes demand.*

So we need to start this journey of discipleship and maturity by admitting our weaknesses and lack of ability, and we need to begin to gaze at God and recognise the difference between what He wants me to be and what I truly am! Once we recognise we are Spiritually Poor then God sees material He can work with: and to such He is prepared to give the Kingdom of Heaven.

So still today in 2013 the indispensable condition of receiving the Kingdom of God is to acknowledge our spiritual poverty. God still sends the rich away empty (Luke 1:53). As C H Spurgeon expressed it: 'The way to rise in the Kingdom is to sink in ourselves.' This cuts immediately right across our pride filled spiritual arrogance and leaves us with nowhere to go: we must realise our spiritual poverty and acknowledge it openly. What is needed is a humble dependence upon God: I must decrease and He Increase. Only then are we promised the Kingdom of Heaven.

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