

The Beatitudes

Matthew 5: 1-12

Sermon at Eden Hills Uniting Church, February 2, 2014

Today I do not want to provide direct commentary on the Beatitudes, which constitute the reading for today.

Rather, I would like to share, what might be considered footnotes to the text, from my own recent experiences.

Over the last six months, I have been chaplaining a young staff member as he has made a decision to remove himself and his family from a religious organisation that he considers to be a cult. He has come to recognise that the demands placed on him and his family by this religious body have become so restrictive that he feels dehumanised as a result.

I listened as he told me about the web of entanglement in which he found himself and from which he was seeking to break free. He had decided to make a clean break. He was so surprised by the freedom this decision brought to him and his family. But he was worried about possible confusion in the minds of his two children and the possibility of being targeted by the religious body for daring to leave.

Over this last six months he has made it his business to discover many more of the secret and manipulative methods used by this so-called "church". At first he was angry but, at the same time, relieved for having extricated himself.

In our conversation this last week, he realised that, having deconstructed his belief system, he now faced a new challenge - by the task of re-constructing a new belief system; of working out what he believed.

Today's reading from the sermon on the Mount underscores the conclusion we came to in our last conversation. That the Creator-God is a blessing Creator. And that faith is living in the knowledge and trust in that goodness of God.

I would say it this way: that God *is* love. God is not just enacting loving deeds but *is* the spirit of love itself.

So my first footnote to this text is that the beatitudes are a hymn that paints a picture of what belief in this God of love looks like. The Beatitudes give us a clue about the values that matter in the life of this loving God.

My second point is that the beatitudinal lifestyle seems at odds with the widespread belief system that has been handed down to most of us as Christian faith.

My wife Sandy brought back a book for me from her visit to the World Council of Churches Assembly in Korea last year. I have been digging into it over the Christmas break. The book is called, "Your God, My God, Our God". The author is Wesley Ariarajah. It is about rethinking Christian theology from the experience of religious plurality – our reflections on interacting with people of other faiths.

Wesley grew up in northern Sri Lanka. His family was Methodist. So they were a minority among a majority of Hindus and Buddhists. He became a Methodist minister and in 1981 was appointed Director of the World Council of Churches Interfaith Unit, serving for 10 years. In 1992 he then became the Associate Secretary of the World Council of Churches. He went on to become a Professor in the School of Theology at Drew University in the US, lecturing in ecumenical theology. So probably no-one is better qualified to address these issues.

Wesley's life experience of people of other faiths strengthened his Christian faith – and that has also been my experience. But at the same time it challenged it. So like my friend from the cult, Wesley found himself digging back into theological history to find out where beliefs we take as given came from, in particular those that seemed to jar in the face of his experience with other faiths.

He points out, for example, that there is no reference to the life and ministry of Jesus in any of the creeds.

He has come to the conclusion that “Evangelical” formulations – such as Accept, Believe, Confess - Romans 3.23, Romans 6.23

etc, passed on to us from generation to generation, actually shortchange us. It is an inadequate theology for our making sense of God, sin, salvation, Christology, and mission today.

Wesley reckons that as Christianity began to become institutionalised it constructed a high Christology based on an atonement theory that required a high status for individual sin, in order to place Christianity as superior to all other religions and ways of living. Christianity constructed itself to become the one and only way of salvation. This also gave an impetus for Christian missionary endeavor based on 'them and us', 'either-or' foundations.

Such theology has no need of the Beatitudes.

As a footnote to my footnotes, can I say that it has always troubled me over the years that I have yet to see a series of Bible Studies from the Gospels on the life and ministry of Jesus among the evangelical group on campus. Apart from being a self-sustaining way of keeping their numbers I cannot understand how continuing to reinforce an atonement-theory theological construction of salvation encourages deep Christian discipleship.

Little wonder then that, as I have heard, the drop-out rate from church attendance among these young people 5 years after graduation is about 80%. I am led to understand that of these, a significant number lose their Christian faith altogether. Perhaps it was a faith worth the losing; they had been given few theological tools to engage positively with the realities of the world.

But a theology based on a foundation that God is love and that this love is unconditional, places us in the world - under the same sunshine; all wet by the same rain, as Jesus goes on to say in his Sermon on the Mount! As one of my heroes has said: "God did not die to make you a Christian – he died to make you more fully human!"

On the other hand, a theology based on individual salvation, a concept, Ariarajah points out, that is quite foreign to Jews, has the propensity to demonise those who are outside the boundaries constructed in support of such a theology, and creates an arrogant

superiority.

It 'heavenises' as Norm Habel says, while the Bible is quite clearly grounded in earth and land. It invokes a division - the spiritual, to be prized, and the worldly, to be despised. The fact that so much of the ministry of Jesus was spent with those who were "unclean" in the most intimate situations, seems not to have been recognised by those who are concerned only with "being saved". Nor it seems, those institutionalisers who chose what to put in the Creeds.

In fact we know that the early Christians, who were a minority, were thought by the rest of the community to be atheists. That was how their freedom to love all people was interpreted. Their selfless acts of love, particularly among society's rejects seemed only to make sense as some kind of religious anarchy. So they were easy targets for persecution.

This reality is addressed in the latter verses of the Beatitudes.

There is always a propensity to persecute a minority. The advice from the early Christian leaders and the writer of this Gospel was consistent - to keep on loving everyone, keep on reflecting the God who is love. The apostle Peter in his first Letter said, "Honour everyone!" In other words, don't get caught up in the them-and-us, superior-inferior reactionary game.

But that is exactly what seemed to have happened as the church institutionalized and church leaders became more self-interested.

So my second footnote is that our engagement with everyone, including people of other faiths, pushes us to reconsider the foundations of Christian faith. We need diversity to keep us honest! For me, these foundations rest on a belief in the one God who is love. And who loves unconditionally.

This week I was listening to Phillip Adams interviewing Deborah Cheetham, the Aboriginal soprano, who is writing operas from an Aboriginal perspective. Adams recounts how ABC Radio National once held a competition in which the audience voted on what they considered to be the greatest speech of all time. Adams was to

announce the winner. When the winner was revealed to him, he rang Paul Keating to tell him the bad news - that his 1992 "Redfern Speech" came in second. The good news was that he was just beaten by the Sermon on the Mount!

Deborah Cheetham commented: In that 1992 speech in Redfern "reconciliation I reckon at that moment was so close you could have reached out and touched it. You could smell it. You could feel it."

Unfortunately the momentum was lost with a change in government.

But anyone can watch the Redfern Speech on YouTube and reconnect with it. Adams says, "you see the faces and changes of expression when the people at Redfern could see that something really important was happening – that Keating was saying something no white P.M. or anyone in authority had ever said before". Cheetham replies, "I think that the potential for what Australia could have become at that moment in history, had the ideals in that speech been embraced – we would have a very different Australia now... (I felt that) I was having the truths of my existence recognised."

I mention this episode because in that 1992 moment those who were mourning were blessed. The crowd who had gathered at Redfern were comforted. This was a Beatitude moment.

And the same happened when Rudd gave the National Apology.

In other words, the Beatitudes are not just for Christians. God is a God of all. The principles encapsulated in the Beatitudes reflect God's nature. They are universal.

Yesterday morning I was listening to Radio National's Saturday Extra programme. The story was being told of how Australia has become identified with the sun and the surf. 2 1/2 million, or 10% of Australians, surf!

It was not always so, though Aboriginal people who lived near the coast were proficient in the seas. In fact some were early

lifesavers, rescuing new arrivals in trouble, before the *idea* of surf lifesaving had been invented. But the first person to stand upright on a surfboard in Australia was champion Hawaiian swimmer, Duke Kahanamoku.

The story goes that at the Stockholm Olympics of 1912, Duke Kahanamoku was expected to win the hundred metres freestyle event. The Australian swimmer, Cecil Healy, was the Australian favourite and he had qualified for the final. But Duke Kahanamoku, the favourite to win, through a mis-scheduling of his semi-final, missed qualifying. Cecil Healy refused to compete in the final unless Duke was given the opportunity to qualify, which he did and then finally won. So Cecil Healy's great act of sportsmanship cost him a gold medal. They became warm friends and Duke gave an undertaking that he would come to Australia to compete. It took two years and it became quite a national project to get him here. The Australian cricket team offered to call into Hawaii on their way home to pick him up and give him a lift to Australia. The whole nation wanted to see this great swimmer in action, famous for the "Kahanamoku kick", which was his trademark. Coming from Hawaii he was also a surfer. He didn't bring a board to Australia, so he built one and gave an historic display that really got surfing underway in Australia.

This is another Beatitude story. The meekness of Cecil Healy in insisting that Kahanamoku qualify was blessed. Healy could have rubbed his hands in glee at his good fortune that he did not have to race the champ in the final. But he chose to forgo that seeming advantage. Meekness. He may not have "gained the whole world", but at least 2 1/2 million Australians have benefited!

So my third and final point is that the Beatitudes are for everyone, as God is God of everyone.

Psychiatrist James T Fisher, in his "Case Book of a Psychiatrist" said:

If you were to take...all the authoritative articles ever written...on the subject of mental hygiene, if you were to combine them, and refine them, and cleave out the excess verbiage, if you were to take the whole of the meat and none of the parsley, and if you were to have all these unadulterated bits of pure scientific

knowledge concisely expressed by the most capable of living poets, you would have an awkward and incomplete summation of the Sermon on the Mount.

In our discipleship let us look for these principles in the everyday. Let us allow them to dwell in our hearts and minds to transform us, to bless and be blessed.