

The Heart of the Beatitudes

Meta

Date: February 16, 2025

Location: Apostles Anglican Church

Readings

Jeremiah 17:5–10

Psalm 1

I Corinthians 15:12–20

Luke 6:17–26

Opening

*Two roads diverged in a wood, and I
I took the one less travelled by and
And that has made all the difference.*

Remember who wrote these lines? Now is the time to make your high school English teacher proud. The great American poet laureate, Robert Frost, from his poem ‘The Road Not Taken.’ I confess I went to Google myself (for my shame), for I, as a high school junior, selected Robert Frost my high school poetry project. I am sorry, Mrs. Willis, for forgetting Frost!

The image of two roads isn’t just a memorable figure in American poetry, it’s one of the oldest ways to describe the call holiness in Scripture and the early church. ‘There is a way that leads to life and a way that leads to death.’ Such is the summary of Psalm 1 and the words of Jeremiah.

You may have noticed in the Daily Office readings this year we have begun praying all 150 psalms in a month. It was a decision I made for our parish, one reason being that the first day of every month, we would begin a new month praying,

Blessed is the man who walks not in the counsel of the wicked, nor stands in the way of sinners, nor sits in the seat of scoffers; but his delight is in the law of the LORD, and on his law he meditates day and night.

The teaching of the two ways permeates the Old Testament, but it’s also the backbone of Jesus’ Sermon on the Mount in Luke. We’ll come to that more in a moment, but first let’s listen more deeply to Jeremiah.

Jeremiah, the Seer of Hearts

Jeremiah is a prophet, and as I noted a few weeks ago, prophets are not only seers of future events, they perceive the unseen things of the present moment. With the man who trusts in the Lord

Jeremiah perceives a soul with deep roots, roots nourished by living water. For the man who trusts in himself, he perceives not only an unwise decision that leads to death, he sees that his very heart has turned his back on the Lord. And so Jeremiah ponders the tremendous power, not only of our decisions, but the heart underneath every decision. For Judah, he warns:

The heart is deceitful above all things, and desperately sick; who can understand it? "I the LORD search the heart and test the mind, to give every man according to his ways, according to the fruit of his deeds."

This is the condition of our diseased hearts when we turn away from our Lord. And yet, God made the heart to be paradise, to be his very temple within. The desert father St. Macarius of Egypt said:

The heart itself is only a small vessel, yet dragons are there, and lions, there are poisonous beasts, and all the treasures of evil, there are rough and uneven roads, there are precipices; but there too is God and the angels, life is there, and the Kingdom, there too is light, and there the apostles and heavenly cities, and treasures of grace. All things lie within that little space.

The Mountain of Beatitudes

And so, with this in mind, we come to the mountain of the Beatitudes, seeing within ourselves, within our hearts that two roads exist—one way which leads to the Kingdom of God, and another that turns back on itself, leading to darkness and captivity.

People have come to this mountain from all around because Jesus the prophet has performed signs and wonders, apparently from Tyre and Sidon in the far north to Judea in the south, where Jerusalem sits.

Luke says Jesus healed them *all*—all these crowds. But when the miracles cease, Jesus the prophet proclaims the Word of the Kingdom. There are two words that summarize this Kingdom. In this Kingdom, there is the word of blessing, and also the voice of judgement, the word of woe. These two words are emblems of the two roads—there is a way that leads to life and a way that leads to death. And those roads lie within every heart.

As straightforward as that ancient two roads sounds, the beatitudes are anything but straightforward. The most straight forward, sensible roads I've ever driven are in the Midwest. Give me roads that are logically numbered and shaped by a grid like those in Kansas or Iowa. The roads there make sense. Not so the roads in Boston. They were constructed in another world, the world of colonial America. And Bostonians have the strangest traffic patterns, which make me very nervous. If you need to turn left on Route 1, you don't wait for a full break from oncoming traffic on your left, you pull across two lanes, stop oncoming traffic to your left, wait, pray to your Lord, then complete the turn once there's a full break on your right. Boston's my favorite city, not only because of my beloved Red Sox, but the roads and the driving there don't make sense!

The Tension of the Beatitudes

The road of blessing in the Beatitudes don't make sense to us! There is an undeniable tension, even a strain one feels within the beauty of the Beatitudes. The promise of blessing, comfort, and fullness reach our deepest longings, but there is a tremendous expanse between today's suffering and tomorrow's healing, between our present condition and the future reality. Jesus announces blessing for the hungry *now*, but they *will* be satisfied. He proclaims blessing for those who weep today, they

will laugh in the future, but it's not today. We speak about the Kingdom of God as being 'the already, the not yet.' There is a beautiful tension within the Beatitudes—the words of blessing.

The Beatitudes are a paradox. They may be familiar to our ears, but they don't fit with the logic of the world we live in. Who dares suggest blessing comes when people hate you, when you weep and suffer poverty? Jesus does, the prophet of paradox.

The paradox is on purpose. Fr. Maximos Constas says that the church fathers believed the so-called illogical material in Scripture has been 'deliberately placed throughout Scripture by the Holy Spirit.' We have to have things that sound illogical and impractical in Scripture because, as Constas says, this is 'the irruption into the world of something beyond the world...the word of God does not aim to please (your) senses, but to overwhelm them.'¹ //

And so our inner world—the universe of the heart—can be overwhelmed by this tension. Here is Jesus, the Son of God, speaking words of blessing, but they don't make sense.

And this makes me think of our father, Jacob, who wrestled with God all night long at Peniel. Jacob would not let go until he received blessing from the Lord. And this is how we come to the Beatitudes with our pain and these strange blessings. We bring our pain even as we seek the Lord's blessing in the pain.

How long, O Lord, must the single mother work two jobs, the combined income which still does not provide her family a living wage, before she experiences abundance in the kingdom of God? How long must your saints endure the sleepless nights of weeping and sadness before they can enjoy unending days of laughter and joy? You proclaimed blessing while we endure today's suffering, but the promise is still far off.

The Woeful Words

Better to wrestle in this way than to give up on God in the waiting—to turn our backs on him. For that's what's at stake when the words of Scripture defy our logic. We can either wrestle with God, fight to trust him, or we can turn to our own way of salvation. The enigmas of Scripture, even when they are promises and words of blessings, are **tests** from the Lord. Remember what the Lord said through Jeremiah, 'I the Lord search the heart and test the mind.' There are two roads in that test. One leads to life and blessing, even though wrestling with God is involved. But there's another way through the enigma—it's the escape route of impatience; the demand that I receive every blessing on my terms and my timeline.

Invariably this means creating idols to save us, to bring us relief. There are no few idols in this world ready to bring instant relief, to exchange the promised, eternal blessings of God for the instant comforts of this world. This is one reason we hear words of warning on this mountain:

Woe to you who already seized your blessing in temporary wealth, temporary feasts, temporary joys, the praise and esteem of the masses.

¹ Fr. Maximos Constas, *The Art of Seeing*, 20-21.

Woe be unto us who have rooted our hearts in this life alone. Let's recall the words of St. Paul reflecting on Jesus' resurrection as we meditate on the Lord's words of blessing and woe. 'If in Christ we have hope in this life only, we are of all people most to be pitied.'²

The Key to the Enigma

And this to me is the key to the enigma of the Beatitudes—the risen Christ. We must see that the Jesus who proclaims blessings on the poor, the persecuted, the hungry, and the mourners is the one who endured the worst suffering even to death on the cross and rose again on the third day. His cross and resurrection are the guarantee that his blessing will not always be 'already, but not yet.' One day they will come in fullness and they will be ever present, ever new...new like the new mercies of the Lord each morning.

But there's another key to living and embracing the beatitudes. And that is the presence of the Holy Spirit in our hearts, whom the Father sent to us after our Lord's resurrection and ascension. The Holy Spirit in the heart is the answer to how the poorest of the poor can experience the kingdom of God now before their poverty is finally ended. The Holy Spirit in the heart is the source of joy already come, even though days of weeping may continue. Only in the Holy Spirit can one leap for joy when you endure persecution and hatred for the sake of Christ.

During my sabbatical, I read a book by a monk named Archimandrite Zacharias Zacharou, which in my opinion, is one of the finest names I've ever heard. What exquisite alliteration in that name!

Fr. Zacharou describes the heart that is indwelt by the Holy Spirit as a furnace. Have you ever been near to your central heating when the furnace kicks on? It's an awesome sound—WOOSH! That's the force of what happens when we journey to the heart, when we've waited patiently on the Lord, and then we encounter the Holy Spirit in the heart. WOOSH! It is not a surge of emotion, but the heart waking up in a holy encounter with God the Holy Spirit. It makes all our suffering seem like a light momentary affliction compared with the weight of glory that comes with meeting him in the heart.

Fr. Zacharou says:

*Divine love is not a figment of the imagination or a fleeting impulse of emotion. It possess the whole being of man, and like the burning bush, it ignites his soul and body with its fire, without consuming them.... The passions and sin weigh man down and bind him to the earth. When, however, he is flooded with the rushing torrent of divine love, the heart is transformed into a bedewing furnace, the mind is illumined and inspired, and the body becomes light. All that previously oppressed and afflicted him, is now no longer burdensome.*³

In the heart the Holy Spirit awaits us to meet him. He is the Already of the Kingdom. And when we meet him there, receive the blessing of his love, you can endure the 'not yet' of the Kingdom. How small the words of ridicule, hate, or scorn spoken against sound once we experience the torrent of the Spirit's love in the furnace of our hearts?

² 1 Corinthians 15:19

³ Archimandrite Zacharias Zacharou, *Hesychasm: The Bedewing Furnace of the Heart*, 105–106.

The Heart of the Church

And that is not all. The Holy Spirit does not dwell in individual heart alone. He was poured upon the heart of the Church. The Church is the place where these beatitudes become true. The Word of God is not the only thing that is an irruption into the world of something beyond the world, the Church is, too. In and through the Church lies the way to life, and the already arrived reality of the Kingdom that Jesus proclaimed in the Beatitudes. //

One of the best examples of this comes from the ancient church. In the third century, the church suffered horrible persecution under the Roman Emperor, Valerian. St. Ambrose relates a story of a deacon and martyr from this era who revealed the heart of the kingdom. St. Lawrence was a deacon serving in a church that had been targeted by Roman officials. Imperial officials came to the door of the church, met St. Lawrence, and said, 'we're returning tomorrow and we demand you give us all the treasures of the church.'

The following day when the officials came to confiscate the church's treasury, St. Lawrence assembled the church's poorest members to meet their persecutors. Roman officials then asked St. Lawrence, 'where are the treasures you promised?' St. Lawrence pointed to the poor sons and daughters of the church and said, 'These are the treasures of the Church.'⁴

Closing

You and I were created to hear, receive, and experience beatitudes for all eternity. We were made for that paradise. And until that day comes, we have been given new hearts by the Holy Spirit, the guarantee of our inheritance until we acquire full possession of the blessings Jesus promised. And we have been given the Church, that sacred Mystery, where God has *already* revealed his Kingdom blessing on earth. May it be so on earth as it is in heaven, where the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit are glorified forever and ever. Amen.

⁴ St. Ambrose, *De Officiis*, 2.28