

The Beatitudes

The Beatitudes. What are we to make of them? Obviously, they're not 'laws', not rules, they can't be; you can't order someone to 'be poor in spirit' or 'meek'. But the thing is I'm not poor in spirit, or meek, or pure in heart, so the Beatitudes make me feel uncomfortable. What can I do about it? How do I get to be meek so that I can inherit the earth?

So, what are they? Blessings? Maybe, but are several ways of translating the Greek word μακάριος, not only 'blessed' as our version has it, but I've also seen 'happy', and 'fortunate' and I'm sure that there are others. In fact, one could translate μακάριος quite satisfactorily as 'Lucky you' – as in, 'Lucky you if you happen to be poor in spirit, meek, pure in heart etc.'

I was pondering all this in preparation for this sermon, when I happened across a quote from St. Benedict in something I was reading, where he refers to his monastic community as 'a school for the Lord's service' – and then it sort of clicked. The Beatitudes are like what we, in educationese, call 'expected learning results or outcomes!' They are, in other words traits and dispositions we are meant to develop as we progress along the Christian way; they are graduation, not entrance requirements.

I like analogies, so I began to play with this one a bit, and the rest of the Sermon on the Mount becomes like a syllabus, based on these expected outcomes, as a model for the

more specific curricula in the various schools of Christian life: family, parish, church-school, monastery and so forth. Like all analogies, of course, this one doesn't hold 100%, but I think that like any good analogy, it highlights several points. I'd like to mention two.

In the first place, thinking about the Beatitudes as educational results makes it very clear just how counter-cultural they actually are, and how daunting the challenge is to Christians in this day and age. Imagine, for a moment, what the reaction would be were a school to explicitly incorporate the Beatitudes into its published list of 'expected learning results'. They would run something like this: "X School prepares their students to be individuals who:

- a. are poor in spirit: i.e. are acutely aware of their own weaknesses and limitations proper self-esteem can only be founded on the truth about oneself.
- b. mourn: i.e. carry as their own burden the suffering of others.
- c. are meek: i.e. not self-assertive, as willing – or more willing – to follow and to obey as they are to lead.
- d. hunger and thirst for righteousness: i.e. place justice before wealth, security or personal happiness.
- e. are merciful: i.e. always forgive – 'bleeding-hearts', in other words;
- f. pure in heart: i.e. naïve, unwilling to play the game to get ahead;
- g. peacemakers: i.e. not all that interested in winning;

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h. and finally, they will receive all sorts of rewards once they're dead, but in the meantime, they will be hated and reviled by almost everyone, for which they will also be blissfully grateful.

You can imagine how that would go down with prospective parents – the school would not be long for this world!

Now, I admit, I had to smile to myself as I concocted the above list, but in all seriousness, I also find it troubling that I should find it amusing. It makes me realize how far our culture has strayed from the Gospel message. In fact, your typical school brochure promises to produce individuals who are almost the exact opposite of the above in almost every respect!

And that brings me to the second point – given such a set of goals, where do we find “schools” that offer a “curriculum” based on them in the world today?

A few centuries ago it wasn't a problem. Put yourself in medieval Europe. If you were a peasant living in a village, your parish would be the center of not only your spiritual life, but your social and economic life as well: if you were a craftsman or merchant in a city, your guild church would be the focus; if you were a scholar, the college chapel. And in all these cases you would live your life according to the rhythms of the liturgical year with its seasons, its feasts and its fasts, and be governed by laws based on Holy Scripture rather than on a secular constitution. It is as if the whole of society was sort of a “university of the Lord's service,” the guilds, parishes and monasteries, etc. being the different “schools”: of departments.

Well, obviously, things have changed and most of the modern successors to the institutions mentioned have become almost aggressively secularized and promote a culture that is moving further and further away from its Christian roots. The few institutions that do remain, the parishes, the odd school or college, no longer form a part of a larger whole, they are isolated, and have a hard time providing the sort of education they once did. And all this places an inordinate responsibility on the individual believer.

What it means is, that to receive the same sort of ‘holistic’ education in Christianity that our forebears did, we have to work a lot harder than they did.

What is important, though, is to remember that, as the Beatitudes remind us, Christian ethics is not so much about following a set of do's and don'ts as it is about becoming a certain type of person – and that requires an educational process – a simple act of the will not be enough.

The season of Lent is upon us, and I urge you to take advantage of it - : the readings, the liturgies, the fasts and the various activities offered by parishes, - to take stock of the progress you've made in the ‘school of the Lord's service’. The prayers of the universal Church provide powerful support for such an effort. To return the education analogy, we could say that Lent is a time for a ‘self-study’ prior to accreditation. And, as anyone in the business can tell you, you don't have to be perfect to be accredited, you just have to be on the way to perfection.

SAINTS:

The Presentation of Christ in the Temple (Candlemas), 2 February. This day marks the completion of forty days since the birth of Jesus, when Mary and Joseph took the child to the Temple in Jerusalem. The requirement in Levitical law was for Mary to be 'cleansed', the completion of her purification following the birth of a male child. Until that day, she could touch no holy thing nor enter the sanctuary. Yet on seeing the holy family, Simeon praised God and acclaimed the infant as 'the light to enlighten the nations' and the prophet Anna gave thanks and proclaimed him her Redeemer. The image of Christ as the Light has led to the celebration of light countering darkness, with candles often taking a central place in the observance.

Anskar, Apostle of the North, 3 February. A native of Picardy, Anskar was a monk of Corbie near Amiens who, after the conversion of the King of Denmark to Christianity, went to Schleswig and attempted to start a Christian school there. He was expelled by the locals but went on to Sweden, where he is reputed to have built the first Christian church. In 832 he was consecrated Bishop of Hamburg and sixteen years later became Archbishop of Bremen. He returned to Denmark to convert the King of Jutland. He preached widely throughout Scandinavia and was much-loved for his work with the poor and in mitigating the slave trade. He is the patron saint of Denmark. He died in the year 865.