January 29, 2017 **Fourth Sunday after Epiphany, Lectionary 4**
Matthew 5:1-12 **by Vicar Albert Romkema**

"The Beatitudes"

Introduction

Emperor Constantine is often credited with converting the Roman Empire to Christianity in the early 300s A.D.

Before the battle of Mulvian Bridge in 312 A.D., the fourth-century historian and bishop Eusebius reported that Constantine saw a flaming cross in the sky bearing the words "in this sign thou shalt conquer." Constantine did indeed conquer, routing and killing his enemy on a day that loomed large not only for the emperor but for Christianity.

The next year Constantine, now the Western Roman Emperor, along with Eastern Roman Emperor Licinius signed the *Edict of Milan*, which finally ensured religious tolerance for Christians. The agreement granted freedom of worship to all religions and brought an end to the *Age of Martyrs*, Christians who were brutally killed for their belief in God, which had begun after Jesus' death. Christians were also given specific legal rights such as the return of confiscated property and the right to organize dedicated churches.

After unifying the Roman Empire under his rule in 324 A.D., Constantine promoted growth of a Christian ruling class and ensured Christianity's increasing and enduring prominence throughout the Roman Empire.

Why I am telling you all this is because although for the first 300 years after Jesus' death Christians were the oppressed minority, rebels hiding in catacombs, the arrival of Constantine changed all this. Christianity became the imperial religion of the Roman Empire. And for much of the next 1700 years, it has mostly been a *top-down* and hierarchical system which emphasized power, control, and accumulation. For many Christians the Reformation changed this to some degree but the stature of the church as a largely inward-looking entity, somewhat closed and, to a degree inhospitable, remained. Some would argue that is now changing as churches are less able to take for granted the people who fill the pews.

Once we entered a position of power and privilege under Constantine, Christians had difficulty reading and understanding the *bottom-up* emphasis of the bible; and its preferential position of the poor (as especially demonstrated in texts like the beatitudes, and the larger *Sermon on the Mount*).

In our text today, Jesus pulls us away from lives focused on self-centred living, accumulation, and the maintenance of control and power, and then offers another way to navigate life's journey; one which emphasizes acts of humility, a focus on trust, and then provides a message of hope for the poor, the meek, the humbled, the merciful, and the peacemakers.

Body of the Text

Jesus and Moses

As I read and re-read the beatitudes in preparation for this sermon, I was struck by the rich metaphors of the setting. For instance, when we hear that Jesus sees the crowds that are following him and so goes up a mountain and sits down, the mountain immediately made me think of another mountain, Mount Sinai, and the Old Testament story of Moses receiving the law from God. Jesus, after all, has been called the "new" Moses. The similarities between the first few chapters in Matthew and of the story of the Exodus of Israel are intriguing and perhaps can be a gateway to deeper insights into the meaning of both. The similarities:

Both tell of the slaughter of infants (by the angel of death for the Egyptians, and at the hand of King Herod after Jesus was born),

Both tell of passing through water (the Red Sea by the fleeing Israelites, and the waters of baptism by Jesus), and

Both tell of the temptation in the wilderness (the Israelites are tempted away from trusting God, and Jesus is tempted by the devil).

In the case of Matthew, the beatitudes are the introduction to the larger *Sermon on the Mount* (Matthew 5-7) and in the 10 Commandments the corresponding introductory statement reads, "I am the Lord your God, who brought you out of the land of Egypt, out of the house of slavery." (Exodus 20:2)

The Ten Commandments

You know, for the Jewish people this is the first commandment (whereas for Christians the first commandment is "you shall have no other gods before me"). You might say, "*I am the Lord your God* is not a commandment at all is it? It is just saying that God did it all for us" – well yes, exactly. Our lives with God always begin with a lavish flourishing of God's goodness and love. God saying *I am the Lord your God who brought you out of the land of Egypt, out of the house of slavery* encompasses God's promises to his people and his love for them, for us. The 10 Commandments are actually more about *liberation* than *restriction*.

The beatitudes

And I think the beatitudes operate under the same sort of principle – they are more liberating than restricting. Although the world seems to favour those who look out for themselves, the self-sufficient and the strong, Jesus contends that no matter how aggressive and impersonal the world may seem, in God's deep order of creation, the truly blessed are ultimately and actually the gentle, the merciful, the peacemakers, the humble, and the poor.

But the beatitudes are not *entrance requirements* for the kingdom. Jesus is not asking the crowd to become poor in spirit, or to mourn, or to be persecuted in order to discover God's kingdom. Reading it this way makes acquiring these things feel like a spiritual triumph – as if there is something we need to do to receive God's blessing. That is simply not the case. We do not do anything to become right with God. God comes to us; God bridges the gap through grace, through Christ. Our activities with each other and the world are a response to what God has already completely done for us. And we cannot diminish God's love for us through our actions. We can only learn how to receive God's love, to allow it, believe it, celebrate it, and trust it.

Promises of grace

But there is also brokenness in the world, and so Jesus offers consolation to those who find themselves poor, in mourning, and persecuted by way of offering a declaration of the substance of grace: at our most vulnerable, in our deepest grief we are simultaneously most blessed. That is the tension we forever encounter in our lives –the sacredness of eternity and our salvation pushing up against the poverty of a broken world; the infinite edge of God uniting with our deepest sorrow. The beatitudes capture this tension and create blessing from the depths of our brokenness.

I wrote a poem that attempts to capture this image. It was a response to a painting I had seen by the native artist Michael Robinson. It depicted a man standing at the edge of a choppy lake, peering outward into the darkness. It was very windy and the landscape was mostly barren, rocky, and desolate…except for a small plot of colourful wildflowers growing nearby and a striking raven whose song he was intently listening to (the

raven is especially sacred in native spirituality); and all this while the sun is just cracking over the horizon with the promise to flood the world with its warmth. The poem is titled *Time and Eternity*:

Behold
the landscape of the Spirit

With its subtle undulations
of loss and hope
shadow and light
time and eternity

We are left peering
into an impenetrable unknown

searching

buffeted by winds
of arbitrariness
and fragility

Yet
all the while
held in tension by

Delicate spring flower beauty

Orchestrated raven's call melodies

Steadfast hope
of blazing tendrils
erupting from a brilliant

morning

sunrise

The sacred depths of God are always pushing up against our brokenness; calling us blessed, redeemed, loved.

Trust

The beatitudes call us to *trust*, not in strength, but in the unparalleled promises of God's grace. To put this into a slightly more contemporary context, *the beatitudes tell us what it means to belong to God. What it means to be at home with God.* Jesus implies here that to belong to God does not begin by ticking the boxes on a list of rules; it does not begin in inheritance, it does not begin with rituals…it begins with *trust*, from whatever circumstances we find ourselves in.

> I visited a member of Zion this past week in the hospital. It was a difficult visit, as these visits often are. This gentleman was gradually coming to the realization that he would not be going home again to live with his wife as he had done only a few months ago, and for the past 60 years.
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> And I ask myself: where is the comfort for him? Where is his blessing? It seems to me that each time I arrive he shows me God's blessing in his attitude, his activity, his humility. It comes in the form of courage to begin each day again; to go to the hospital's workshop with his son; to graciously welcome the guests who visit him – and to leave the rest of his life to the mercy of God; to trust God.
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> He said once, "Albert, we need to pray, but we cannot demand anything from God. We may only ask and then leave it up to him." I found this statement incredibly profound – arising from this man, the *poor in spirit (theirs is the kingdom of heaven*). For this person, at this time, trust is not optional; it is all there is, and a gift that he shares with each of those he meets, and now here today too as I share this with you.
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> The contemplative Thomas Keating writes that, "The chief thing that separates us from God is *the thought* that we are separated from God." That is why passages like this one in Matthew offer such

comfort. Even, and perhaps especially, in those times when we feel the most lost and alone, removed from God – poor in spirit, meek, grieving, and persecuted - God promises, God covenants that we remain his blessed children. In these moments, the bottomless depth of God is present and available to us like a gushing stream, saying – "*do not be afraid, hold fast, you are blessed, trust in who I am and what I have done for you*. *I am surrounding you; I am holding you in the palm of my hand – even as you mourn the loss of your loved one; even as you struggle with this illness; even so, even so, even so…I love you,"* says our God.

There is a painting by Salvador Dali of the *last supper* that I have come to appreciate – and perhaps can help with this idea of how completely God is among us. In it the body of Christ is almost transparent as he sits at the table with the disciples, arms outstretched, offering a blessing (and himself). One can see right through Jesus' body to the lake and boats behind him. It is almost like seeing Jesus becoming the world. That perhaps is an appropriate image of Jesus in our lives – he is all and in all.

All that we know is encompassed by God, infused with God's grace; and not just *things* but *empty spaces, longings, and hungers* that in themselves hold the promises of the salvation message. As Simone Weil said, "It is grace that forms the void inside us, and it is also grace that fills the void." In our deepest selves, our deepest joys and our deepest wounds we are already united in the goodness of God's grace; grace fills the void – and not somewhere in the heavens but right here among us, within us, and between us. There is a deeper love of God always surrounding us, seeking to transform our lives from within our lives.

Conclusion

So, although since the time of Emperor Constantine in the 4th century much of Christianity has been presented from the side of the powerful, the affluent, and the privileged, the bible pulls us in another direction.

It presents a unique revelation which is an alternative history from the bottom, from the side of the enslaved, the dominated, the oppressed, and the poor.

The beatitudes tell us what it is to belong to God – and invite us to *trust in the slow work of God in our lives*.

God is already here with us, blessing us freely and liberally right where we are, even as we are surrounded by undulations of loss and hope, shadow and light, and time and eternity. Amen