

A Bible Bullet (aimed at the heart)

Sixth Sunday in Ordinary Time, Cycle C
Jeremiah 17:5-8; 1 Cor. 15:12,16-20; Luke 6:17-26

This week in the reading from Luke's gospel we read the Beatitudes as presented by Luke. Again we must compare this presentation with Matthew's to taste the full flavor of Luke's story. Let's begin as the stage is set by Luke and Matthew.

Matthew chooses a mountaintop, the Sermon on the Mount, to offer the Beatitudes as the new law. The old law came to Moses on Mt. Sinai with the etching of the Ten Commandments onto stone tablets. A mountaintop was, for the Jews, the appropriate place for an encounter with God. Matthew was writing to a Jewish audience so he selected a setting to which his audience would relate. Then he wrote a composite of teachings of Jesus at various times and locations, set the moment of teaching on a mountain top, and presented the new law to replace the old. The appeal to a Jewish audience is undeniable.

Luke, on the other hand, wrote to a Gentile audience. He was not concerned with the traditions of Judaism. His audience had never been considered among the "chosen" of God. The setting of Luke's choice is very different. Jesus has just returned from praying on the mountain. He then selects his twelve apostles. The unvarnished version from the Greek states:

After coming down with them ***Jesus stood on level ground***, and with him a great crowd of his students, and a giant mass of people....And raising his eyes toward his students he said,

You the poor are in luck, because the kingdom
of God is yours.

You who are starving now are in luck, because
you will have your fill.

You who are crying now are in luck, because
you will laugh.

You are in luck when the world hates you and
excludes you and defames you and casts
your name out like something evil, because
of the Son of man. Be happy on that day and
jump for joy because look, your reward will be
great in the sky(heaven).

The people to whom Luke tells his story can understand being poor and hungry and sad. They aren't interested in a restaging of the Sinai experience. They are being told that as miserable as they are, they are among the lucky ones who have a great future ahead, not here on earth, but later. Jesus stands among them, on their level, looks them in the eye and promises great rewards.

In contrast, Matthew lists eight Beatitudes. Luke lists only a few and then follows these with harsh words for those who do not belong to the wretched-on-earth bunch:

But woe to you the rich, because you have had
your consolation.

Woe to you who are satisfied now, because
you will starve.

Woe to those who are laughing now, because
you will grieve and mourn.

Woe to you when all the world speaks well of
you; after all, that's the same way their forefathers
treated the pseudo prophets.

Matthew's audience is not poverty stricken but poor in spirit. Luke emphasizes hungry and sorrowing people's physical needs.

We know that humans have both spiritual and physical needs. The resolution to the contrasting approaches is perhaps best offered by our reading in Jeremiah, which was written 600 years before the gospels:

Blessed is the man who trusts in the Lord.

Whatever our need, spiritual or physical, it is the Lord only who gives us what we need. Any who believe that they or other humans have the power to satisfy are setting themselves up for disappointment.