

How the Mourning Ends (Amos 4:1-2; 6:1-7; Isaiah 61:1,3; Rev 21:4) Matthew 5:4

“Where there is no vision, the people perish,” (Pr 29:18 [KJV]) says the proverb. Yet, many people--many Christians--have no real, operating vision. This is because we too much think the Christian life is something we live by ourselves. We think to live the Christian life is primarily personal and individual. But Jesus didn’t give these Beatitudes to us as individuals. He spoke of them collectively to a collective people--his followers, to be lived into and practiced collectively as disciples.

I said last time, disciples of Jesus live with a grand and glorious vision. In the Beatitudes, we see the grand and glorious vision of Jesus, and we are meant to grasp it also. For the Beatitudes are declarations of God’s agenda--God’s priorities--as He in Jesus is bringing his kingdom on earth. So, first, God’s kingdom of salvation is for this world, not heaven. The Kingdom of God or Heaven is for the earth. Two, with the kingdom coming in Jesus, there are reversals of things. The world as it is is not as it ought to be. Therefore, God in his redemption of it through Jesus is putting this world to its rights--the rights of God’s Kingdom, God’s Rule over all things as they ought to be. Three, with Jesus--his life, ministry, teaching, death, and resurrection--that kingdom is present in power among us and in us by the Spirit of Jesus. Four, our lives are to be thus aligned with the kingdom priorities and concerns. We are to begin to make real now in so far as we can what will one day be made real completely on the earth. Five, this Christian practicing the life of the kingdom is not merely a personal or religious matter. We--the Church--are supposed to show here and now--and in a way that affects society, economics, and politics--in a provisional way in so far as we can, what is ultimately

coming with the kingdom and its fullness, when all the things Jesus declares are realized in fact and in full for all the world. As preacher/scholar Tony Campolo has written, “When we talk about Jesus, we make it clear that He is not just interested in our well-being in the after-life. He is a Savior who is at work today trying to save the world from what it is, and make it into a place where people can live together with dignity,” (*Let Me Tell You a Story*, p. 126).

The usual translation of this second beatitude is, “*Blessed are those who mourn, for they shall be comforted.*” But the meaning of the beatitude depends on what these *blessed* people are mourning about. Just as the term “poor in spirit” (in Matthew 5:3) and “poor” (in Luke 6:20) has a specific context in Jesus’ time, so also does the phrase “*those who mourn.*” If we look at the context of “mourn” from the OT texts we read, especially Isaiah 61, these mourners are those grieved over both their own people and their nation. They long to be as the people of God ought to be. They long for their lives and worship and national life to be in accordance with God’s kingdom and justice. They are hoping for God’s great vision to become a reality of which they are a part.

Now while it is certainly true, that the Christian message and the comfort of God address us in our private times of grief and sorrow that is really not what is primarily in view here. Jesus second “blessed” here is upon those who mourn in this larger sense. They are people who are saddened by deep concern for the world, for its suffering all around. For there is a clear-sighted realism about the world-as-is that pierces the heart of people who truly live out of the vision of the kingdom of God. Jesus promises these mourners that God will comfort them by satisfying the longing of their hearts-- “*they shall be comforted.*” It is the kingdom declaration that knowing God’s faithfulness

and final justice is both happening and will one day be present among us in totality. This visionary declaration--part of the grand and glorious vision we should all share--anchors our hope in what God will certainly do and is meant to empower us "mourners" to carry on faithfully, until that time when--as we read-- "*The Lord God will wipe away the tears from every face; death and pain and mourning will end,*" (Rev 21:4). In Jesus' words is God's plan for the world, and it is filled with living hope. And--as with all the Beatitudes--there is both a present and future aspect here.

Now mourning is not or does not have to include tears, though it often does and rightly so. But a mourner is not necessarily one who weeps. A mourner--in the word Jesus uses here--is one who also expresses deep concern. As NT scholar Clarence Jordan has pointed out, "*tears aren't essential to mourning, but deep concern is,*" (*Sermon on the Mount*, 1974] p. 22). Jordan is best known for *The Cotton Patch Translation of the New Testament*, in which Galilee becomes his native south Georgia, Jerusalem becomes Atlanta, and the language is colloquial. Back in the 1940s, Jordan was deeply concerned about the sad state of economic conditions for poor farmers--black and white--in south Georgia. Further, he was deeply concerned about the racial prejudice, segregation, and discrimination there. His college degree was in agriculture, and he believed he could make a difference teaching poor white and black farmers how to make a significantly better living. So instead of teaching the New Testament in an academic setting, he became an agricultural missionary. He began a cooperative farm near Americus and Plains, GA. He enlisted whites and blacks to share in experimenting with crops and farming methods, and developing a successful pecan-growing business.

Those who farmed became co-owners. They shared their work and proceeds as

the early church is described as doing in Acts 2(43-47) and 4 (32-37). They named the farm KOINONIA, the NT Greek word for community or fellowship. They both preached the Gospel of Jesus Christ and to live it by actions of repentance, forgiveness, non-discrimination, and love for all neighbors without regard to color. Now, mind you, this was in 1942, 12 years before the Brown vs. Board of Education Supreme Court decision that outlawed segregated schools and 13 years before the 1965 Civil Rights Act. It was nothing short of astounding for Jordan to lead this remarkable effort in a very resistant part of Georgia, the cotton-plantation country. But Jordan believed Jesus' Gospel with its vision. His concern motivated him to action. He believed in following Jesus and trying to live out his Lord's vision.

Nonetheless, the Koinonia Farm was not well received by everyone around. Its products were boycotted by the feed and seed store, refusing to sell them. So the farm had to develop its own marketing networks. Other things happened. There were drive-by shootings. Their roadside market was dynamited. The lives of these folk were for many years in danger daily. The local Southern Baptist association expelled them from fellow-ship. Nevertheless, they survived and thrived. Their witness gained a wide following. Koinonia Farm still exists and still sells pecans. It would go on to spawn an ever better known ministry, Habitat for Humanity, which of course builds homes and provides home ownership for poor families world-wide. President Carter has been associated with that ministry for many decades now.

Every one of the Beatitudes has hope in it, you see, and such hope inspires action. God is not leaving things as they are. God cares. God mourns. God is deeply concerned. And so God acts. That's what Jesus' entire life and ministry, then death and

resurrection, were about. That is what is behind this word translated as “mourning”--being deeply saddened and concerned to the point of action. Again, as I said last time, following Jesus, or discipleship, is not about believing the right things in order to escape this world and go to heaven. It’s about doing the right things as part of God’s plan to redeem, to save, the world. So then Jesus’ disciples are to live with a grand, glorious vision of the world to come--the kingdom come--while engaging in the tangible kingdom actions of love and service like Jesus their Lord.

Thus to hear Jesus’ word, “*Blessed are those who mourn,*” is the announcement, our deliverance--and the world’s--is at hand. It is happening. There is hope. And because there is hope, there is reason to live differently. The repentance Jesus calls for is grounded in what God is doing in, for, and all around us. As Jordan said, “*There must be a concern about this bankrupt condition so deep [within us and our world] that it will find some [real, positive] expression.*” Those people who mourn, who say, “‘*Sure, the world is in a mess, and I guess maybe I’m a bit guilty like everyone else, but what can I do about it?*’ What they’re really saying is that they are not concerned enough about themselves or the world to look for anything to do. No great burden hangs on their hearts. They aren’t grieved. They don’t mourn.”--that is, not as Jesus speaks here.

When Jesus arrived on the scene and said, “*Repent and believe the good news; the kingdom of God is at hand,*” (Mt 4:17), you see, he was announcing that the world as it is dying, and the world God is making new is beginning to happen--the kingdom of grace, justice, and rightness. His words echoed and connected with Isaiah’s word from God, “*to comfort those who mourn,*” (Isa 61:1-3). They can be comforted because God is acting. Because of that reality, those who follow the One who Announces the

kingdom can enter into it and begin to live into its growing reality in our midst. Those who believe, can see. They have the vision, and their mourning over the way things are just doesn't leave them there, but to action to action. Christians who pray for God's kingdom to come are first aware that what is often happening in ourselves and our society is far from God's reign. So we are to rightfully mourn, and repent. They see the suffering, the violence, the injustice, and oppression--in all forms--around them. They hunger for its end, and to truly serve God and see his kingdom and God's breakthroughs show themselves. So, in their mourning, in their deep concern, they act. That's what Jesus was doing.

There is a paradox to the fact that in order to feel deeply concerned and encouraged at the same time about the woes of this world--and our own lives--we must mourn them deeply as well. There is an Arab proverb, "*All sunshine makes a desert.*" We have to really hurt to really hope. The great English composer Edward Elgar was listening to a young girl singing. She had a beautiful voice and virtually flawless technique, well beyond her experience. "*But she just missed greatness,*" he said. "*She will be great, when something happens to break her heart.*" In our lives, sometimes grief, sometimes joy have the upper hand. We sometimes journey through grief into joy, where the psalmist says our mourning is turned into dancing. In one sense, there is no healing without woundedness, no growth without suffering, no resurrection without death. So our grief through our own personal losses and our ache at the evil and injustice in the world calls us to place our grief and hurt into larger hands than our own.

The mourners of whom Jesus speaks here as "*blessed*" are those who in some way, shape, or form, have broken hearts--broken hearts for the world, their neighbors,

themselves. They ache for something greater, and the greater is what Jesus promises in the kingdom. And they ache, in a sense all the more, because they see--they have the vision of Jesus--that something great is happening already, and want it all the more. But immersed into Christ, surrounded with God's goodness, and catching the vision, so concerned are they, they begin to live as though the future is a reality even now. Even as we mourn the poverty, oppression, and tragedies of life, as well as our own personal losses, we are sustained and strengthened by a deeper peace and joy. With Christ, we are able to experience both grief and joy simultaneously and live with the tension this creates. The living, reigning Christ enables us to hold these incongruities together. In fact, the living, reigning Christ calls us to share--as did he--in both this suffering and love, both mourning and hope. The Kingdom vision of Jesus enable us to live in this mixed reality.

To illustrate that, Clarence Jordan spoke of segregation as like a dying horse. A dying horse may kick convulsively now and then, and can still do some damage if you're close by. But truth is, it's time is over. It's dying. He--and his community--lived in the coming reality of segregation's death. No, the task wasn't finished quite yet--it isn't still--but they caught the vision--they had mourned enough--to work together in bringing about Christ's community--Koinonia--even in the midst of things not yet as they ought to be, but will be. And with the vision of Jesus, our lives can make the kingdom difference in the lives of others and the way things are around us, sad as they be. But that is what Jesus' Kingdom people are called to do, and they have the vision to do it.

To cite Tony Campolo again, I tell a quick story he has told. He tells of about a NYC Bowery wino named Joe who was about as bad as you could be. But he was

con-verted at a mission service one night, and his life changed immediately and dramatically for the better. He worked for the mission untiringly, caring for some of the least and worst in the city. He cleaned up drunks, fed them, mopped up their messes, swabbed out the bathrooms, and cared in every way possible he could.

At a preaching meeting some months later, another wino stumbled down the aisle, repenting, crying out, “O God, make me like Joe!” After several of these pleas, the mission chaplain leaned over and whispered to the man, “I think you mean to say, ‘make me like Jesus,’ don’t you? ‘Jesus’ the man blinked uncomprehendingly. Looking back at the chaplain, he said, “Is he like Joe?” (Cited in Lee Wyatt, *The Incredible Shrinking Gospel*, p. 117).

That says it all, doesn’t it? Through us the world beholds the face of God present in this world--caring, concerned in sacrificial, self-giving, even risky ways, and constituting for others an experience of the God’s salvation for the world. “Is Jesus like us?” the world has a right to ask. We have the privilege by God’s grace to be such. As the great 4th century preacher John Chrysostom (347-407) said, “*This is the rule of most perfect Christianity, its most exact definition, its highest point, namely, the seeking of the com-mon good...for nothing can so make a person an imitator of Christ as caring for one’s neighbors.*” Those who truly mourn, learn to turn their mourning--with Jesus’ vision--into action. “*Blessed are those who mourn, for they shall be comforted.*”
Amen.