

"The ten Beatitudes", Alastair McIntosh, in *The sun slowly rises*, Wild Goose / Iona Community, Glasgow, Easter 2017, pp. 133-6.

Resources for Holy Week 133



The ten Beatitudes

My French wife and I, she of Huguenot stock, take our holidays in the Cévennes. There, in 1878, in the land of her ancestors, Robert Louis Stevenson made his famous journey with a donkey. It's wonderful to have connections with a part of France that has been so shaped in its identity by a Scottish writer. At the little commune of Saint-Germain-de-Calberte I talked to David, an elected councillor. I asked, 'What did Stevenson do for you?' And he answered, 'He gave us back our history.'

This past summer we spent time there down by the river. I found myself thinking about spiritual teaching stories. Like the river rolling on, how do they

find new life for the present day? What prompted this reflection, was that in the previous week I'd heard somebody ask a question. 'Why do we hear much about the Ten Commandments, but little of the Beatitudes?'

It seemed to me that, especially for the modern world, we have a marketing problem. The Ten Commandments have been packaged to punch out a message. For whatever reasons, not so the Beatitudes.

First, consider the Commandments. They are found in slightly differing forms in both Exodus 20 and Deuteronomy 5. Some scholars reckon they can actually be broken down into nearly twenty commandments. For example, how many proud anglers who might be sticklers for the Ten Commandments pay attention to a subclause of the injunction against making graven images? How many, when submitting snapshots of their trophy catches to the *Stornoway Gazette*, remember that the text says: 'Thou shalt not make unto thee ... any likeness of any thing ... that is in the water under the earth' (Exodus 20:4)?

A point not to be taken too seriously? Well, that depends on your era and theology. In *The Men of Lewis*, a classic text about the evangelical revivals of the northern Outer Hebrides, the Rev Norman Macfarlane remarked that one evangelical, 'like many worthy men who regarded photographers as notorious breakers of the Second Commandment ... would never listen to any appeal made for his portrait.'

My point is not to have a dig at conservative Christian anglers. Not even to open a window on an age when the 'selfie' would have been considered the height of godless vanity. My point is simply to show that the 'ten' Commandments are a simplified representation, a marketing package, as might be said, of more complex and nuanced material. A summary that has been created down through Christian tradition with the number ten chosen as an aide-memoire.

If so for the Commandments, why not for the Beatitudes? We find them spread over two gospels. There are twelve of them in total, eight of them in Matthew 5 and four in Luke 6. The messaging is more scattered than the Commandments. There are gaps, overlap and repetition such as, if you try trotting out the Twelve Beatitudes, you end up falling over yourself. They just don't sit very neatly together.

That said, some of the apparent repetition carries important nuances. Consider the near-duplication of 'Blessed are the poor ...' (Luke 6:20) and 'Blessed are the poor in spirit ...' (Matthew 5:3). These days, freely available online tools like Bible Hub make it easy to delve into the original Greek. *Ptōchoi* quite plainly means poor in the sense of economic destitution; so poor means poor and Luke is talking about material poverty. Matthew, however, uses the same word, but clearly as a metaphor by specifying 'poor in spirit'. This can be read as offering us two distinct Beatitudes. One for the material world, the other for the spiritual. Both matter. If you go only with Luke, you get an overly materialistic spirituality. If only with Matthew, an overly otherworldly spirituality. While we don't need to labour the point, the same goes for those who hunger. Luke leaves hunger as hunger. Matthew treats the hunger (and thirst) as being for righteousness.

Sitting by the river in the Cévennes that summer's day in France, I played with the Beatitudes using apps on my phone. I had translations in both the King James Version and the Revised Standard Version (Catholic Edition). These I distilled down into a decalogue – a set of ten statements – that felt satisfying and usable in teaching contexts. Others might make their own selection. Some might feel that no selection should be made. But in case it's helpful, here's what I came up with:

'And Jesus lifted up his eyes on his disciples, and said:

- 1 *'Blessed are you poor, for yours is the kingdom of God.*
- 2 *'Blessed are the poor in spirit, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven.*
- 3 *'Blessed are you that hunger now, for you shall be satisfied.*
- 4 *'Blessed are you that weep now, for you shall laugh.*
- 5 *'Blessed are they that mourn, for they shall be comforted.*
- 6 *'Blessed are the meek, for they shall inherit the earth.*
- 7 *'Blessed are the merciful, for they shall obtain mercy.*
- 8 *'Blessed are the pure in heart, for they shall see God.*
- 9 *'Blessed are the peacemakers, for they shall be called [daughters and] sons of God.*
- 10 *'Blessed are those who are persecuted for righteousness' sake, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven.'*

1: Lk. 6:20

6: Mt. 5:5

2: Mt. 5:3

7: Mt. 5:7

3: Lk. 6:21a

8: Mt. 5:8

4: Lk. 6:21b

9: Mt. 5:9

5: Mt. 5:4

10: Mt. 5:10

Alastair McIntosh

Suggestion for contemplation and prayer (Ed.):

Write the 10 Beatitudes on a 'prayer card' and carry this around with you throughout Holy Week, or after. Reflect on the Beatitudes, or on a single Beatitude, throughout the journey of your day.