

SESSION ONE:
LIVING WITH OPENNESS TO GOD

pilgrim

In this session we are looking at what it means to live with openness to God and with openness to the world. We start with a provocative little story where a woman who is an outsider comes to Jesus, asking for her daughter to be healed. She is open to God.

Opening Prayers

Generous God, help me to live as a child of your kingdom
Give me the mind of Christ.

Let us hear our Lord's blessing on those who follow him.

'Blessed are the poor in spirit, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven.
'Blessed are those who mourn, for they will be comforted.
'Blessed are the meek, for they will inherit the earth.
'Blessed are those who hunger and thirst for righteousness, for they will be filled.
'Blessed are the merciful, for they will receive mercy.
'Blessed are the pure in heart, for they will see God.
'Blessed are the peacemakers, for they will be called children of God.
'Blessed are those who are persecuted for righteousness' sake, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven.'

MATTHEWZ 5.3-10

God of our days and years
We set this time apart for you.
Form us in the likeness of Christ
So that we may learn of your love
And that our lives may give you glory.
Amen.

Conversation

Be honest. When you think of the Beatitudes, or read them for the first time, what do you think? What makes sense about them, and what doesn't?

Reflecting on Scripture

Reading

From there he set out and went away to the region of Tyre. He entered a house and did not want anyone to know he was there. Yet he could not escape notice, ²⁵but a woman whose little daughter had an unclean spirit immediately heard about him, and she came and bowed down at his feet. ²⁶Now the woman was a Gentile, of Syrophenician origin. She begged him to cast the demon out of her daughter. ²⁷He said to her, 'Let the children be fed first, for it is not fair to take the children's food and throw it to the dogs.' ²⁸But she answered him, 'Sir, even the dogs under the table eat the children's crumbs.' ²⁹Then he said to her, 'For saying that, you may go—the demon has left your daughter.' ³⁰So she went home, found the child lying on the bed, and the demon gone.

MARK 7.24–30

- Read the passage through once
- Keep a few moments' silence
- Read the passage a second time with different voices
- Invite everyone to say aloud a word or phrase that strikes them
- Read the passage a third time
- Share together what this word or phrase might mean and what questions it raises

Reflection

STEPHEN COTTRELL

Knowing your need of God

What does it mean to be poor in spirit?

Like most of the beatitudes, the meaning is not obvious. Does it mean that it is good to be poor? Or does it mean that there are different sorts of poverty?

The invitation of the Christian life is to live our lives in communion with God. This is the way to find fulfilment, peace and happiness. This is also the way to find riches, though they are unlikely to be the sort of wealth the world holds dear.

Jesus has come to make communion with God possible. Therefore to be blessed – and some translations of the Bible say 'Happy are the poor in spirit' – is to receive the blessings of God through relationship with Jesus and by living our lives in the way that God directs.

Therefore when Jesus says, 'Blessed are the poor in spirit' he is very definitely not talking about material poverty. Jesus does have a great love for and affinity with the poor. He himself comes to us as a servant. But he also sees the evils and injustice of poverty, and asks us to join with him in building a better world. Rather, Jesus is speaking about the attitude we have to God and to ourselves in relationship with God and with God's world.

So you could put it like this: 'Blessed are those who recognize their need for resources outside themselves ...' (which of course the materially poor often find easier than the materially rich!). Or 'Blessed are those who do not take themselves too seriously ...' or 'Blessed are those who receive and live life as a gift ...' or 'Blessed are those who know their need of God'.

Poverty of spirit is about acknowledging right relationship with God. We are created by God. We owe God everything. God is not another object within the creation, but the one upon whom the whole creation, and all of life, depends. God is the source of life, and God is the one whose endless outpouring creativity sustains life. In comparison to God we are nothing, and yet through God's great love for us in Christ, we are everything. We are the object of God's love. God wants to make us rich, by enabling us to live our lives well. And to live life well means living in relationship with God and with one another. God wants to bless us, but there will only be room for God's rich blessing in our lives (for God will never force himself upon us) if we recognize our own poverty and invite him in. Thus, when we are poor in spirit, when we do recognize

our need of God, when we do live in this right relationship with God, the blessing we receive is nothing less than the kingdom of God itself.

In short

When Jesus says 'blessed are the poor in spirit' he is referring not just to people who are materially poor, but to people who are fully aware of their need of God.

For discussion

- Look at all of the beatitudes and, using the introduction to this course, go through the text and identify the three-fold pattern of blessing, vocation and promise in each beatitude.
- Put in your own words what you think 'poor in spirit' might mean and share examples of when you have seen this in others or even known it in yourself.

Rich in blessing

What will being poor in spirit look like? It will mean recognizing that although we must strive to embody and live by the Christian virtues of, for instance, patience, kindness, generosity, gentleness and self-control (these are some of the fruits of the Spirit that are listed by Paul in Galatians 5.22–23), these are, as the text for Galatians indicates, fruits that come to us by the Holy Spirit. They grow naturally when we root ourselves in Christ. So it is, again, the attitude of poverty, the recognition of our need for God's gifting and blessing, that matters most. We come to God as ones who are poor and in need. We ask God to give us what we need to live our lives well, and also enable us to persevere so that the fruits of God's richness and goodness are manifest in our lives. Jesus makes this connection when he observes that a good tree cannot bear bad fruit, nor a bad tree good fruit. 'Each tree is known by its own fruit', says Jesus, 'for it is out of the abundance of the heart that the mouth speaks' (Luke 6.44 and 6.45).

Because we are poor in spirit we will catch hold of God's vision for the world. This will inevitably lead to lamentation. The world is not as God would have it. The second beatitude is 'Blessed are those who mourn', which means 'Blessed are those who cry out to God for the injustices and sorrows of the world'. And the blessing we receive will be strength to persevere and to go on seeking God's will and God's solutions.

But we must choose to be poor in spirit. And we never move on from it. It defines all our relationships. It means coming to Jesus with the same combination of determination and poverty that we saw in the story of the Syrophenician woman. It means being in touch with the pain of the world. It affects and shapes all our relationships and the way we approach each person, each day and each encounter. It leads to great joy as well as great challenge, as we enter into the mind and purposes of God for our life and for the world. Poverty of spirit means being rich in God. Yours is the kingdom of heaven.

In short

Being poor in spirit means that we live in the knowledge that we need God's help to live lives that are marked by patience, kindness, etc. and shaped by God's will ... We cannot do it by ourselves.

For discussion

- What difference would being poor in spirit make to one or more of the following situations or relationships:
- Your relationship with those you love most?
- Your relationship with colleagues at work?
- The way you pray and the things you might ask for?
- Your priorities?

Concluding Prayer

Jesus, lord of time,
Hold us in your eternity.
Jesus, image of God,
Travel with us the life of faith.
Jesus, friend of sinners,
Heal the brokenness of our world.
Jesus, lord of tomorrow,
Draw us into your future. Amen.

Sending Out

During this next week reflect on what you have learned and explored in this session. Think about what it means to know your need of God and be open to his blessings. How will you let being poor in spirit change you this week?

These readings may help you in your reflections:

When I began to search for the meaning of life, I was at first attracted by the pursuit of wealth and pleasure. But as most people discover there is little satisfaction in such things. A life oriented to gormandizing or killing time is unworthy of our humanity. We have been given life in order to achieve something worthwhile, to make good use of our talents, for life itself points us to eternity.

HILARY OF POITIERS (315–67)

If you are wise, you should endeavour to be more a reservoir than a canal. A canal spreads abroad water as soon as it receives it, but a reservoir waits until it is filled before overflowing and, as a result, without loss to itself communicates its superabundant water. In the Church of the present day we have many canals, but few reservoirs.

BERNARD OF CLAIRVAUX (1090–1153)

Underneath all the texts, all the sacred psalms and canticles, are liquid varieties of sounds and silences: terrifying, mysterious, whirling, sometimes gestating, yet always gentle. I feel them in the pulse, ebb and flow of the music that sings in me. As I sing I float like a feather on the breath of God.

HILDEGARD OF BINGEN (1098–1179)

The world ridicules devotion in life, caricaturing devout people as peevish, gloomy and sullen, and insinuating that religion makes a person melancholy and unsociable. But the Holy Spirit, speaking through the mouths of the saints, and indeed through our Saviour himself, assures us that a devout life is wholesome, pleasant and happy. True devotion brings a person to wholeness.

FRANCIS DE SALES (1567–1622)

Unlike the animals and the trees, it is not enough to be what our nature intends. It is not enough for us to be individuals. For us, holiness is more than humanity. If we are never anything but people, we will not be saints and we will not be able to offer to God the worship of our imitation, which is sanctity. For me to be a saint means to be myself. Therefore the problem of sanctity and salvation is in fact the problem of finding out who I am and of discovering my true self. Trees and animals have no problem. God makes them what they are without consulting them, and they are perfectly satisfied. With us it is different. God leaves us free to be whatever we like. We can be ourselves or not, as we please. We may be true or false, the choice is ours.

THOMAS MERTON (1915–68)