

Blessed Are Those Who Mourn

Matthew 5:4

By Rev. Kevin Chiarot

This morning we continue in the beatitudes, the opening portion of the Sermon on the Matthew. Our text is: Blessed are those who mourn for they shall be comforted.

Blessed are those who mourn? This is what Chesterton called truth standing on its head, shouting for you to notice the absurdity. This is some other ethical universe where everything seems to work backwards. This is, in many ways, an extension of what we looked at last week on poverty of spirit. And it shows us that it is not sufficient to be poor in spirit. We must move from confession – of our spiritual bankruptcy – to contrition. *This* is what the poor in spirit do. We shall make two points. The mourning and the comfort.

I. The Mourning

First, the mourning. Spiritual poverty is to lead to grief and mourning. Let's just note something stark – and frankly unwelcome - at the outset. Mourning -- sustained and deep-- lamentation and grief, is a critical component of Christian existence. It is not a bug. In a fallen world, it is a feature.

Yes, the Christian life is one of joy, Laughter, or a joyful heart, is good medicine. We are not called to a grim, cheerless existence. True. But it is better to go to the house of mourning than to the house of mirth (Ecclesiastes tells us). Funerals/Frat House. And a truly Christian heart is capacious, wide, catholic, layered, deep and complex – it contains multitudes. And it is certainly clear here – in any event -that joy is not a sort of joviality, or a perpetual, juvenile obsession with cheerfulness or fun. Listen to Luke's parallel for this very beatitude:

Blessed are you who weep now, for you will laugh. Woe to you who laugh now, for you will mourn and weep.

Laughter NOW is not called blessed. The opposite in fact: woe to those who laugh now. Whoever says this must be mad, or morbid. Dark and depressed. Lacking joy in some fundamental way. Except of course, Jesus said it. Jesus who is never recorded laughing in the gospels. Nor does he tell any jokes. He does not think some sort of manufactured joy is part of an integrated human existence.

He was, we are told a man of sorrows. Has anyone ever called us that? (Shouldn't we be called what he is called?) Maybe we don't get this because we don't follow the Master into the mystery of the cross.

"A man of sorrows, acquainted with grief." And yet, he too – this sorrowful One – was said to be anointed with the oil of joy beyond all his companions (See that in Ps. 45 and Heb. 1).

He was both the man of sorrows and the man of highest joy. And the two are locked together. In this age they always exist together. Deep sorrow is the KEY to deep joy. And without the mourning, the joy will be hollow.

With that, let's ask: what is being mourned here? Ultimately, this must be mourning for sin, for it is sin which brings forth death and all the miseries of this life. (mourning belongs to the whole age) The background for this beatitude (like last week's) is Isaiah 61. There the Messiah comes to Israel, mourning in exile, and promises:

To heal the *brokenhearted*, and to provide for those who *grieve* in Zion—to bestow on them a crown of beauty instead of *ashes*...the oil of joy instead of *mourning*, and a garment of praise, instead of a spirit of *despair*.

That's the whole beatitude in Old Testament form. The people in view then, are mourning their own sin, which brought on the state of exile. For those who mourn, mourn first for their own sins. For the only sacrifice sinners can offer in light of the sacrifice provided in the cross, is a broken and contrite heart. With Paul, they cry out, O wretched man that I am, who will deliver me from this body of death? (Paul's cry) They heed the commands from the book of James:

Wash your hands, you sinners, and purify your hearts, you double-minded. Grieve, mourn, and wail. Change your laughter to mourning and your joy to gloom. Humble yourselves before the Lord, and He will lift you up.

With Paul, they confess that they are the chief of sinners. With Luther – in the very first of the 95 theses, the spark of the Reformation – they agree that the whole of the Christian life is a continual act of repentance. Those who mourn know that God commands even our emotions. We are *commanded* to mourn and weep for sin. Mourning here begins in the heart, but it does not remain there. It grips the whole person, and it outwardly manifests itself in contrition and, yes, in tears. In the spiritual equivalent of torn clothes-- of sackcloth and ashes.

And this is not navel gazing, or morbid introspection. This is rigorous self-examination in the holy searching light of God. This is the ethos of Psalm 51 – that great prayer of brokenness, sorrow, and repentance – fleshed out across one's life. This is what Paul calls godly sorrow, which creates repentance without regret, not worldly sorrow, which produces death.

And as paradoxical as it is, the blessed life is aided and sustained by godly grief. Blessed, flourishing, delighted, honored, are those who mourn. But mourning is not merely about individual sin. For the Scripture clearly teaches that the godly mourn for all the sins of Zion. Like Jeremiah, they weep for the nation. Ezekiel is told by the Lord to “go throughout the city of Jerusalem, and to put a mark on the forehead of those who grieve and lament for all the detestable things that are done in it.” Daniel prays at length, in chapter 9 of his book, repenting not only for his own sins, but for the sins of the fathers, the prior generations of Israel, whose sins had led to his, and Israel’s, exile in Babylon. Like Paul – those who mourn -- they weep over the enemies of the cross. Mourners are not radical individualists.

They know that their plight is bound up with the plight of the people of God, and so, in solidarity with their people, they repent and mourn over all the church’s sins. In this, they reflect the Lord Jesus, the man of sorrows, the man of mourning, who wept bitterly over apostate Jerusalem, even as it rejected, and prepared to execute, him. But mourners do not only mourn their own sins, and the sins of the church, they mourn for the brokenness of the world, for the condition of men and nations. The Psalmist, in Psalm 119, says that streams of water run down his face over those who do not keep the law of God. The prophet Habakkuk laments and pleads with God over the wickedness of the invading Babylonians:

*How long, Lord, must I call for help,
but you do not listen? Or cry out to you,
“Violence!” but you do not save?
³ Why do you make me look at injustice?
Why do you tolerate wrongdoing?
Destruction and violence are before me;
there is strife, and conflict abounds.
⁴ Therefore the law is paralyzed,
and justice never prevails.
The wicked hem in the righteous,
so that justice is perverted.*

Our mourning extends even to the whole creation which, like us, is groaning/yearning for the resurrection. Longing to be liberated from futility. This is the time of yearning, of crying out for vindication (martyrs in heaven), of groaning for the coming redemption of our bodies and the whole created order. We mourn tragedies: natural disasters and human calamities. Accidents. Disease. Pandemics. Death in all its hideous diversity. We mourn for those who suffer these things. We cry out, continually, to the end, with the prophets and the martyrs: How long, O Lord, how long?

It is a phenomenon we can easily avert our eyes from, but the Bible is full of laments. In the Psalms, in the prophets, there is even a whole book of

Lamentations! Jesus in the gospels, laments, Paul laments, the saints in Revelation lament. The whole thing is full of laments. And the lament form, to point out the obvious, is not a popular form in our day. But we need more laments. For NOW, not later, now, before the eschaton, THIS is the time for our tears. It's not like there isn't an overabundance of material for laments. The stuff is in our hearts, the stuff is in the church, the stuff falling out of the sky; you have to work not to trip over reasons for lament. Dylan – the suffering is unending; every nook and cranny has its tears. And laments help us to structure our grief. To make sense out of it, to orient us to the eternal, permanent things. That's why it is these texts (texts of grief and mourning) which, mysteriously, revive our hope in our darkest hours.

Now, let's say one more important thing, about this type of mourning for ourselves, for the church, and for the world. There is not a shred of self-pity or self-righteousness here. We do not mourn for the sins of others, or the world, from some position of superiority. There is not a hint of that in Daniel's prayer. We know we are made of the same stuff, and we know we are implicated in the pervasive nature of sin. We mourn as sinners, for sinners. But even more profoundly, this kind of grief is deeply God-centered. The mourner is broken that he has offended the good and glorious God. He is distressed because the Church for which Christ died is defiled. And He mourns for the world because God's name is blasphemed, and His law is ignored and violated, and the good creation is drenched with blood.

Mourning is Theo-centric activity. The godly mourner begins and ends with a passion for the honor of the thrice-holy God of light and love. Those who mourn enter into the mystery and the misery of the world's unremitting darkness. For that's where their Savior lived, and that's where he is still found. If this is too grim for us – its only because our conception of the Christian life is too shallow. And our vision of joy too thin. Our God is weightless.

II. Comfort

Our second point is comfort, or if you will, the end of mourning. Those who are broken-hearted, stricken with grief, those who mourn in Zion, are driven into the arms of Jesus the fellow-mourner, the man of sorrows, who bore our greifs and carried our sorrows. He has stooped to share our nature and taste our sadness. And He delights, He even yearns, He calls for those who are weary and burdened and heavy-laden, to come to him. And in his gentleness and meekness he gives us rest. He sweetens our mourning with his presence and grace. His benediction, his pardon, his word of absolution, they are our comfort in this age. He is, as Simeon recognized in the temple, the CONSOLATION of Israel.

As the Heidelberg Catechism puts it: Belonging to this faithful Savior, body and soul, is our ONLY COMFORT in life and in death. And in him we come to God

the Father, the father of mercies and the God of all comfort, who is able, and who does, comfort us in ALL of our troubles. And the Father and the Son comfort us by sending the Holy Spirit, the Lord and giver of Life, who is called “the comforter.”

Our comfort, then, consists in this: the grace of the Lord Jesus Christ, the love of God the Father, and the fellowship of the Holy Spirit. In this way, the Lord God, the HT is with us until the end of the age. Inasmuch as our mourning arises from sin – ours, the church’s, and the worlds – the need to mourn abides. But, as Paul puts it: just as the sufferings of Christ are ours in abundance, so also our COMFORT abounds in Christ.

When our text says, “blessed are those who mourn for the SHALL BE comforted,” it speaks not only of this present comfort which we just discussed, but it places the accent on the future, coming, eschatological comfort in the new heaven and the new earth. Here we must be frank. Without in any way minimizing our present comfort in the Triune God, mourning will remain, and our comfort will be less than full, until the End. Until we are freed from sin, until the church is spotless and radiant, until the nations are healed, and wars cease, until the creation stops groaning from futility... *until death is shattered, until Satan is destroyed, until the martyrs are vindicated, until justice is done, until the glory of the Lord covers the earth as the waters cover the sea.*

That is, until we are in resurrected, immortal glory, mourning remains, and comfort is partial. (the comfort we enjoy now is a foretaste of comfort to come) In the meantime, the causes of our mourning and our tears are producing an eternal weight of glory unworthy to be compared to our present distress. And so this text promises full and complete, incomparable, eschatological comfort to those who mourn. It promises that weeping may last for the night, but full joy will come in that great morning. It promises that He who, for now, gathers up our tears in his bottle, will one day wipe away every tear from the eyes of his beloved ones. It promises the new creation where, as John puts in in Revelation: “the suffering saints will be before the throne of God and serve him day and night in his temple; and he who sits on the throne will shelter them with his presence.

‘Never again will they hunger; never again will they thirst. The sun will not beat down on them,’ nor any scorching heat. For the Lamb at the center of the throne will be their shepherd.

‘He will lead them to springs of living water.’ ‘And God will wipe away every tear from their eyes. There will be no more death’ or mourning or crying or pain, for the old order of things has passed away.”

As the prophet Isaiah foresaw: the ransomed of the Lord shall return, and come with joyful shouting to Zion, and everlasting joy shall be on their heads – and

sorrow and sighing shall flee away. Blessed are those who mourn, for they are, but more so, they shall, be comforted. Amen.

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