

Epiphany 4A, Sunday,

Readings: Micah 6:1-8, Psalm 15, 1 Corinthians: 1:18-31, Matthew 5:1-12

## Glimpsing the Kingdom: Between Hope and the Real

### Introduction

Matthew's Gospel is not anything if it is not hopeful about conversion: never more so than in the Sermon on the Mount, prefaced by the Beatitudes, our reading this morning. As Matthew communicates Jesus' solemn ethical teachings, he holds to the view that for the Christian, perfection *is* possible. In and through Jesus, we ourselves and the world around us *can* change. But to what and whom may we change? To a very different world order, marked by the virtues set down: *poverty of spirit*, acknowledging our dependency as humans beings, not our self-sufficiency; *meekness*, understanding ourselves in a balanced way reflected in gentleness toward others, *hungering and thirsting for justice*, hanging out, begging for a better world in the face of its absence; being *merciful*, deleting the painful act done to us, and then having the fortitude to forget its very memory; being *pure in heart*, being straight, honourable, not hopelessly compromised by multiple and contradictory motivations; being *peacemakers*, bridge-builders; *suffering for justice*, copping it from those powers and people who profit from its opposite. These are the guidelines for a life lived in the footprints of the man Jesus. If these are the bench-marks of the Christian, Matthew's confidence that we are up to the task, is hopeful indeed.

On the other hand, Christianity has not always been so sanguine, so positive, so upbeat about the power of Christian conversion for living ethically. For instance, the Protestant reformer, Martin Luther, was altogether sharply aware of the human spirit's capacity for contrariness: our faculty for holding together the conversion experience with contradictory dark attitudes and deeds. In fact, Luther was proof of the problem: he was among other things, a serial anti-Semite.

So, on the one hand, the Beatitudes have been interpreted to affirm the possibility of living hopefully, living utopianly, perfectly. But on the other, there is something of Luther within us: brokenness even amid our claims to redemption.

### The Challenge: Living between Hope and the Real

Which is true? Is Christian conversion and the presence of Christ able to lead to greater perfection, both for the individual and society, to dream dreams, to live them out? Or should we be sceptical of utopian visions, knowing that we are, even as Christians, still broken, always and only depending upon Christ. Can we afford to be utopian, or should we just settle for realism?

This debate about the place of hope and reality is something that I have thought about for years...in large part because of where I have found myself working, and the issues I have found myself fighting about. Was it worth it – the struggle against military dictatorships in Chile and El Salvador? After all Chile is now in the clutches of a brutal-free market, which actively impoverishes the majorities and El Salvador is now in the grip of drug-barons and caught in war between them. Was it worth it – the work negotiating aid agreements in Mugabe's Zimbabwe, or South Sudan marred by civil war? After all, Zimbabwe remains a 'basket-case' while South Sudan may be only marginally better than when I was there. Was it worth it –after all, some of my allies in those struggles, I found to be far from perfect, terribly broken, compromised people, when it came to their personal, if not broader social ethics? Should I have been more realistic and less utopian about social and political change? But then, if I had bent toward the realistic pole more, would I have had the energy to do anything? Would I not have just surrendered and lived a quiet private life?

Can I make just three observations about Christian faith and the mix of hope and the real, utopianism and realism which we all have to in one way or another balance if we are to be of any use.

**First, without Christian hope, without Christian utopianism, we die.** The faith becomes muted dry and corrupted. The Chilean priest and spiritual director, Segundo Galilea warned of this when he said "The great temptation, the allure, is to look for an accommodation, between on the one hand, the radical following of Jesus and on the other, a vacillating acceptance of the way things are."

**Second, that said, I beg to think about hope and reality slightly differently. I suggest to you that the apparent opposition between Matthew's hope in Christian perfection and Luther's scepticism about the human condition are not necessarily antagonistic opposites at all, but checks upon each other, that lead to a better whole.** In my experience, the great challenge for utopians – and I am one of them – is that we demand that the 'arc of history' bend to justice, *now*, and in doing so, we claim too much for ourselves, becoming self-confident or despairing, with little insight into our own failings and frailties. We become no more than self-assured "terrorists for good" (José Ignacio González Faus). On the other hand, for the so called "realists", the great challenge is to be sensitive enough to the "signs of the times", to realize change is knocking on the door and will not be calmed.

**Third, in the real world, we need to come to terms with the fact that in working for justice,** we often have to accept *the least unsatisfactory result* rather than *the most satisfactory result*. The world is a complex place, and we never know everything nor have control of all the levers. Karl Rahner put it like this: "It is never possible, wholly and definitively to overcome the riddles of human existence and history, which we experience. All human endeavours, as crucial as they are...with all their wisdom and goodwill" are only ever partial.

Hope and Realism then, are not opposites...each needs the other. Christian hope, without realism, is still born, it struggles to make a practical difference. Christian realism, without hope, without the utopian, reduces us to dry conformity.

### **Australia Day, January 26<sup>th</sup>, 2020**

So, to January 26<sup>th</sup>, 2020 – Australia Day. I think that we have come to a dry conformity in this country. If I were to be blunt, I would say that I don't believe that we are a particularly *imaginative people*. We languish in our conformity to what we see as realism. I think that is the case with our indigenous communities – we could do better, we must do better. I think that is the case, as we confront the very real challenge of climate, the environment and emissions - we could do better, we must do better. I think that is the case in thinking our way through the problems free-market economics now present us, with the power of special interests, that influence and twist the public good – we could do better, we must do better.

The Beatitudes call us to a new way of seeing ourselves and others in the world: wise, hopeful, utopians!