

Epiphany 4, 2014. St. Augustine's Freeland. Nigel Taber-Hamilton Micah 6: 1-8, Matthew 5: 1-12

So now the teaching begins! Jesus, the new Moses, ascends the mountain just as Moses did, and we hear a new teaching from God.

But I'm getting ahead of myself! Matthew has done the scene-setting for us but it's worth reviewing, because the opening weeks of the season of Epiphany track that scene-setting. We've heard about Jesus birth and baptism, his calling of disciples, and now we are part of the crowd who have followed Jesus up the mountain. What will follow is traditionally called "The Sermon on the Mount" – chapters and chapters of teaching that are at the core of Jesus moral and theological vision. If I were to preach as long as Matthew's Jesus you'd probably all be asleep! It wasn't really a sermon; Matthew collected and organized Jesus' teaching into one, long, virtually seamless presentation and today's gospel is laying down the theme.

Here, as that sermon begins, the vision of Jesus and the new way of life he proclaims, is laid out more and more clearly. Not only in the manger, but also in Jesus' teaching, God is revealed. In the ways this kingdom of God works, the way this household of faith is run, in its values and priorities, God is made known.

Epiphany is a revelation of God's life but it's more than that – it's an invitation into that life, into a different way of living than the one the world values, an invitation that calls for a response.

If we choose to follow Jesus into God's abundant life, we will be different. It's an invitation that invites us to conform to the way this kingdom works, its values and priorities. If we do so then we're born and reborn into new relationship with God, each other and creation. Jesus invites us to follow and leaves that invitation in front of us like a letter freshly delivered on our front door mat. What do do? Should we open the letter? Because if we do our world will change; that's the nature of God's kingdom – always moving, always changing.

Today's gospel is the contents of that unopened letter.

So what's all this stuff about "blessedness"? In the original Greek the word is *Makarios*, and some translate that word as "Happy"..... "how happy are they who....."But *Makarios* is a difficult word to translate with a range of meanings that run from "happiness" to "fortunate" to "privileged" – it's more than "happy", deeper than "fortunate", deeper than "privileged".

But on face value these qualities that Jesus recommends actually don't start out sounding like blessings to me, not happy-making, not fortunate! I'm not sure that I want to be poor in Spirit, and mourning involves death, as we have experienced only too recently. It's hard to see any of the values that *Makarios* represents written on any of the lives of Jesus' regular audience. So what is Jesus talking about?

It seems to me that being "poor in spirit" is another way of talking about the self-emptying that Paul makes reference to when writing to the Philippian community. We have to be open and

empty in order to let God and others come in. When we're emptied, we're free of clutter, available and roomy.

That self-emptying stance permeates all of the beatitudes: in order to love and be loved, we need to have openness at the center of who we are. In order to do justice, and love kindness and walk humbly before God we need to have openness at the center of who we are. We need to become an empty glass so that love and loving beings can pour themselves in.

That's actually very counter-cultural. The world we currently inhabit – at least here in north America – seems to be about the exact opposite of being empty. We fill our lives with things so that they can't be empty! At least, so we think. The opposite of being "poor in spirit" would, I suppose – in biblical terms – to be "wealthy in spirit", and that's not a good thing! We're full of ourselves, eager to display how much we know, how much we can do. We're filled up with multi-tasking, preoccupied by busy-ness, or, quite literally, filled up with more food than we can possibly eat, encouraged to buy more than we possibly need or store! It's always "more is better". We have no time – or room – for God!

The Beatitudes stand in stark opposition to this way of living, this attitude toward living. As one theologian has said of them, there's a core principle that connects them all, and it is this:

“you are blessed if you don't cram yourself full of food, drink, ecstasy, pride, drugs, fame, sex, visits to the beach, the best hair-do, the flattest abs, addiction to whatever, shiny teeth, fastest car, every kind of wealth, and of course reputation, reputation, reputation. Instead, blessed are you if you stay empty, if you become a spacious home for God, for other human beings, for the long-suffering earth.

Jesus' beatitudes are really this: **doorstops that hold your soul open to God.**

So it's no accident that Matthew chose to place them at the opening of the Sermon on the Mount! They set the tone for everything that follows, and they invite any one who reads this gospel to adopt that attitude of openness to what will follow.

That includes us. So as we continue our journey through the Sermon on the Mount – with a pause for Lent and Easter – may you hear and embrace that invitation to be open to the possibilities that come with following God into the Kingdom. Amen.