

Look Beyond the Things You See

I. Sermon on the Mount

A. In the season of Epiphany we hear about the beginnings of Jesus' ministry and the revealing of the Christ.

1. Today we have the opportunity to begin a 4 week series on Jesus' teaching from the Sermon on the Mount.

a. Here Jesus paints a graphic picture of those who are blessed,\ those who inherit the new age that he will introduce.

(1. It is the keynote address of his entire teaching.

b. Last week we heard that after Jesus' temptation in the wilderness and hearing of the arrest of John by Herod, he withdrew to Galilee and began to proclaim, "*Repent, for the Kingdom of heaven has come near*" (Mt. 4:17). ---

2. It has become commonplace among Christians to conceive of the Kingdom of heaven as a rule of God that will come in the future. Often it is envisioned as something beyond human history, something in the age to come.

a. The very frightening corollary that I hear people saying in our very challenging times is that we can expect even the destruction of the human race and the Earth itself, but that is the necessary prelude for God to make it all right.

b. This kind of apocalyptic thinking is older than Christianity itself and is found as well in Jewish and later in Islamic religion.

3. So, I find it very intriguing to look at this simple phrase, "*Jesus began to proclaim that the Kingdom of heaven has come near,*" close to us now,\ not something to wait for in the future.

a. That was and continues to be a very different kind of message.

b. As we continue our readings through the Sermon on the Mount, we can expect teachings that will be very challenging, upsetting much of what we take for granted.

(1. It is for that reason that Jesus says the proper stance for the hearers of this message is "*Repentance*" which means, 'change your mind,' 'change your practice.' -----

B. The scriptures we have heard today speak with a common voice of the challenge at the heart of all religious faith.

1. We may wonder,\ we may explore,\ we may pursue,\ but we cannot fully understand.

- a. Because we have words to express many things,\ we are easily deluded into thinking that we have explained ‘*this*’ or ‘*that*.’
 - b. Someone has said that we need to remind ourselves constantly that the word ‘*God*’ does not explain or define anything.
 - (1. It merely names that which still remains utterly mysterious.
 - 2. We hear this message in the readings from the prophet Micah,\ the Psalmist,\ St. Paul \ and the Sermon on the Mount.
 - a. Each of these is a powerful antidote to our usual patterns of perception.
 - (1. Each is a call to renounce our false illusion of autonomy.
 - b. Each is a hint that calls for the “*free cooperation of the creative love within ourselves with the love of God.*”
- (Thomas Merton, The Inner Experience, p. 149)

II. “The Kingdom of heaven has come near”

- A. So, what does Jesus mean,... “*that the Kingdom of heaven has come near*”?
 - 1. We have a clue in this first major teaching.
 - a. Jesus begins his proclamation not with ethical imperatives, what we should do, but with blessings.
 - b. The blessings are startling because they describe people in situations and circumstances that are not desirable nor popular in human culture of any age. ---
 - c. Then he connects these situations to the presence of God’s reign!
 - 2. Those who have a deep sense of spiritual poverty are pronounced blessed, they receive the reign of God.
 - a. Those who are overwhelmed by forces out of their control will be strengthened, they are blessed.
 - b. Those who are *meek*,\ those who are *merciful*,\ those who *hunger and thirst for righteousness*,\ those who are *pure in heart*,\ those *persecuted for righteousness sake*,\ those who *work for peace*....
 - (1. upon all of these, Jesus pronounces blessings of abundance:
 - (2. They shall inherit the earth;\ they shall be called children of God;\ they shall see God.
 - (3. These are the ones in the lineage of the prophets before you.
- B. It seems from these teachings that the kingdom of heaven cannot shine forth very brightly in places where people think they have no needs.
 - 1. For we who have power and authority to do things, hear the prophet Micah who exclaims, in tune with Jesus’ blessings,
 - a. no offering,\ no sacrifice,\ no meritorious deed of ours is adequate to obtain God’s blessings.

- b. *“What does the Lord require of you --- but to do justice,\ and to love kindness,\ and to walk humbly with your God.”*

III. Christ is acting today to draw us into a deeper recognition of himself.

- A. In the presence of Jesus, men and women through the ages have come to acquire an unusual capacity, to see with eyes of the heart.
1. What human wisdom can see only as pain, folly or pointless self-denial –
 - a. Jesus reveals as the opening to beatitude,\ filled with the limitless possibilities of God.
 2. Jesus takes our portrait of life and repaints it in front of our eyes.
 - a. He shows us how we ourselves see life,\ then he peels away the canvas we have painted and shows us the canvas of God underneath.
- B. St. Paul tells us that with eyes trained on the Kingdom and ears tuned to the Gospel, God’s foolishness is wiser than any human wisdom.
1. God’s weakness is more powerful than any human strength.
 2. What a startling story God wants to get through to us,\ what a message of hope!
 3. For many of us, this may appear as no more than a dream.
 - a. But it is the vision by which Christ calls us to live -- in the face of darkness and the pervasive illusion of human autonomy.
 - b. At the core of our faith, it is this vision which will shape our world by its light.