

Blessed are those who mourn for they shall be comforted (Matthew 5:4)

If you are looking for an absurdity in the Bible – at least an apparent one – look no further!

- While the word ‘happy’ is not really an adequate translation – the ‘happy mourner’
- Seems like a contradiction in terms – and the promise of comfort does not look to be enough
- Even with the hope or expectation of comfort, it still doesn’t appear to make sense
- In January 1997, I was superintendent minister in Barry in South Wales, it’s really a very hilly town
- And sadly, just after Christmas, I had 11 funerals in ten days – some of them particularly tragic
- Including the death of a six year old child and a young man killed on the pavement by a drunk driver
- And just to make it more difficult, we had a heavy fall of snow and several days of ice
- With snow, the hills, the funerals and stress, twisting in out of the car, I developed nasty sciatica
- And was in such pain that I had to have treatment by an osteopath, Joanne, who later,
- I trust partly through my witness on her treatment table, became a Christian
- One of the things I have learned about osteopathy is that sometimes the treatment hurts a bit
- But it is a different kind of pain from what you are experiencing that makes you go for treatment
- And that I think is the clue to interpreting this Beatitude – it is a different kind of mourning
- It’s traditional for funeral services to begin with opening scripture sentences
- ‘Blessed are those who mourn, for they shall be comforted’ is one regularly suggested
- But we can understand the mourner saying ‘wouldn’t it be better not to be a mourner in the first place?’
- But what about if this is a different kind of mourning – not mourning as in bereavement
- But mourning that somehow follows on from the previous Beatitude, in some kind of sequence
- Blessed are the poor in spirit, blessed are those who mourn

The Sermon on the Mount is the greatest body of the teaching of Jesus that we have (Matthew 5-7)

- but on closer examination, however inspiring the Sermon on the Mount might be
- we cannot doubt that, by ordinary human standards, its teaching is impossible to achieve
- if we looked for a text on which Jesus was teaching in this Sermon on the Mount, where six times he says
- ‘you have heard that is was said but I say to you,’ (or similar) it would be hard to better his own words
- ‘A new command I give you: love one another. As I have loved you, so you must love one another
- By this everyone will know that you are my disciples, if you love one another’ (John 13:34-35)
- But if keeping the letter of the law in a limited understanding of the commandments was hard
- Keeping the spirit of the law as Jesus expounds it is harder still and at the climax of this passage he says
- ‘Be perfect, therefore, as your heavenly Father is perfect’ (Matthew 5:38) – how can we be like God?

The Sermon on the Mount was addressed to disciples, those who had responded to the message of the Kingdom

- Part of that response was repentance (3:2, 4:17) which deals with the wrong in our lives
- The Sermon on the Mount is about both the forgiveness of sins and the transformation of lives
- It opens with ‘the Beatitudes’, a name that comes from the Latin *beatus* (blessed, still the best translation)
- ‘happy’ has been devalued and cheapened in modern usage and, in any event, the focus tends to be inside
- Whereas the focus of the Beatitudes is how we stand before God whose blessing rests on unlikely people
- So much so that the usual order of things is turned upside down, or more accurately, the right way up
- The second of these sayings is ‘Blessed are those who mourn, for they shall be comforted’
- Something that initially seems an absurd thing to say – but not when we realise
- That if we mourn because we are poor in spirit, a progression in Christian experience is being described

I CONVICTION

While most people will immediately associate ‘mourning’ with the sorrow of bereavement

- It is possible to feel deep sorrow and regret about other things, not just the death of a loved one
- ‘pull yourself together’, ‘never mind’, ‘drown your sorrows’, ‘dance away your heartache’
- These are all variations on ignoring it, disguising it, burying it but none of these is a lasting solution
- What about ‘dealing with it?’

The solution to the blessed mourner is to realise that Jesus is speaking about a person with a sorrowful spirit

- It follows on from being ‘poor in spirit’ – when we realise that we are poor in spirit
- That we are by nature spiritually empty, sinful and in great need of God’s grace and mercy
- Then we are of one mind with the Apostle Paul who wrote (2 Corinthians 7:10)
- ‘Godly sorrow brings repentance that leads to salvation, but worldly sorrow brings death’
- ‘Godly sorrow’ is a characteristic of a ‘blessed mourner’ and it springs from conviction of sin

Conviction of sin is not a popular notion even in church – it sits uncomfortably with light, upbeat worship

- While we want worship that is joyful, that is different from worship that is just superficially happy
- Godly sorrow takes us through conviction of sin, where we realise the depths of our fall from grace
- Where we acknowledge our guilt and unworthiness through to the joy of being forgiven, loved, set free
- But while a modern presentation of the gospel might rightly emphasise the joy of salvation in Christ
- It does not always take us by the right route and that route is through conversion at the cross

II CONVERSION

For my entire ministry (30 years and more) the language has been of recruitment, membership and confirmation

- I am someone who believes that numbers in church are very important – but not all important
- I have sometimes been given the impression that we don't want services and sermons that are too serious
- Because that might frighten people away – so we had better not speak of conviction and conversion
- But what if these are the very essence of the gospel message, and the foundation of our church

By human standards, the brothers, John and Charles Wesley, the accidental founders of the Methodist Church

- Were good, devout men – they even took ordination in the Church of England to pursue this
- Yet Charles could write, in a state of conviction of sin, not least for sin that took Jesus to the cross
- 'Can my God his wrath forbear/Me, the chief of sinners spare?'
- The brothers were both filled with Godly sorrow because they were religious but spiritually impoverished
- They did not know the personal working of the grace of God in their lives – until their conversion
- John expressed it in these words, 'I felt my heart strangely warmed, I felt I did trust Christ, Christ alone'
- Charles expressed it like this, 'my chains fell off, my heart was free, I rose went forth and followed Thee'
- When Peter preached on the day of Pentecost his sermon was so hard-hitting
- 'God has made this Jesus whom you crucified both Lord and Christ'
- Luke describes the people 'cut to heart' when they heard it – they were truly blessed mourners
- When we come to terms with our own fallenness and sin, when we realise that we are spiritually poor
- When we are filled with Godly sorrow and mourning, we are ready for conversion and consolation

III CONSOLATION

In 1997, as part of a project with the University of Wales, we sent out a questionnaire to Methodist ministers

- In response to the statement, 'Methodist worship is often dull', 64% of ministers agreed
- Only one in five disagreed, an obvious solution to the problem is to make the services more lively
- But to me the converse of dull is not so much lively as 'real'
- The popular assumption is that we must improve our methods, modernise
- Have newer songs, newer instruments, more drama, dance, dialogue and so on
- But while I am not saying that any of these things is wrong in itself
- I contend that what we need is more of Jesus, more of God's grace working in our lives
- And therefore more conviction of sin, more conversions and then more consolation by God's grace

When Jesus preached, 'the kingdom of heaven is near' he did not expect people to be jubilant but contrite

- When Jesus preached his first sermon in the synagogue at Nazareth, it was from Isaiah 61:1-13
- Where the blessing of the Messiah on the people is the oil of gladness instead of mourning
- And the garment of praise instead of a spirit of despair (Isaiah 61:3)
- Mourning does not exclude the joy that characterises the followers of Jesus – they co-exist
- As Charles Wesley writes, in words that are familiar to so many of us
- And yet that we do not so readily associate with the Beatitudes
- He speaks, and listening to his voice/New life the dead receive
- The mournful, broken hearts rejoice/The humble poor believe

Jesus, if still the same thou art,
If all thy promises are sure,
Set up thy kingdom in my heart,
And make me rich, for I am poor:
To me be all thy treasures given,
The kingdom of an inward heaven.

Thou hast pronounced the mourners blest;
And, lo! for thee I ever mourn:
I cannot,--no, I will not rest,
Till thou, my only Rest, return;
Till thou, the Prince of Peace, appear,
And I receive the Comforter.

Where is the blessedness bestow'd
On all that hunger after thee?
I hunger now, I thirst for God:
See the poor fainting sinner, see,
And satisfy with endless peace,
And fill me with thy righteousness!

Ah, Lord, if thou art in that sigh,
Then hear thyself within me pray;
Hear in my heart thy Spirit's cry;
Mark what my labouring soul would say;
Answer the deep, unutter'd groan,
And show that thou and I are one.

Shine on thy work, disperse the gloom!
Light in thy light I then shall see;
Say to my soul, "Thy light is come;
Glory divine is risen on thee:
Thy warfare's past; thy mourning's o'er:
Look up, for thou shalt weep no more."

Lord, I believe the promise sure,
And trust thou wilt not long delay:
Hungry, and sorrowful, and poor,
Upon thy word myself I stay;
Into thy hand my all resign,
And wait till all thou art is mine.

Charles Wesley (1707-88), HP 529, 4 vv.