

REFLECTION ON THE GOSPEL: MERCY SECONDARY CONFERENCE

Margery Jackman: August 2007 Brisbane

Matthew 5:1-12.

As I stand here tonight in this beautiful chapel, a place so dear to my heart over so many years, I am very conscious of the generations of Mercy women and men who have worshipped, prayed, sung and wrestled with God, here in this place.

In the Irish tradition, there is a belief that the veil which separates the blessed dead from the living, is thinner in some places than others, and that in those holy places, those who have gone before us are able to draw even nearer to us than usual. Here is such a holy place, and tonight, I am sure Catherine McAuley's faithful friend, and founder of the Brisbane congregation, Mother Vincent Ellen Whitty, her 5 companions and all those Mercy sisters who have followed her through the past 146 years, draw close to us as we celebrate what it is to be Mercy in Action in our time and our place.

There used to be a wonderful mural on the wall of St Stephen's cathedral, depicting the arrival of the Sisters. In the mural, the artist depicted Bishop Quinn, regal in his Episcopal robes, stretching out his hand to receive the homage of the local clergy and dignitaries. To the left of the bishop, stand the first Sisters in full habits, but the Sisters are not looking at the Bishop, their attention has been caught by the poor, especially the poor women and children of the colony and already the Sisters are depicted as Mercy in Action, reaching out to comfort and support the poor. Whether he meant it or not, I always felt that the artist had made a striking comment on the challenge not only of the gospel but on the challenge to the hierarchy, posed by those founding Mercy women of action who lived out the vision of Catherine McAuley in their daily lives. Perhaps the challenge was felt by the hierarchy as well, because when the cathedral was renovated

some years ago, the mural of the Sisters' arrival was painted out and replaced by a blank wall.

If there is one thing which our reading presents tonight, it is certainly this challenge to action. We have become so familiar with the Beatitudes that it is important to listen again to the radical voice of Jesus as he comes to us in this Word.

Both Matthew and Luke record the Beatitudes or Blessings of Jesus, spoken to his followers at the beginning of his ministry, at a time when he was experiencing considerable success in the back waters of Galilee, where he had grown up. Both writers place these sayings at the start of a collection of major teachings of Jesus. Matthew, anxious to portray Jesus as the new Moses to his Jewish Christian community, takes Jesus up onto a mountain to preach his sermon, hence the Sermon on the Mount, whereas Luke, the gentile from Antioch, deliberately brings Jesus down from the mountain to the level ground amongst the ordinary people, to preach his Sermon on the Plain. Luke has 4 blessings and 4 woes, Matthew has 8 blessings but clearly both writers are drawing on a common source, possibly a very early collection of the sayings of Jesus, now lost.

Scholars in the main, agree that Luke's first 3 Beatitudes are closest to the original words of Jesus. They are brief, simple and straight forward, addressed directly to his hearers in the 2nd person.

Blessed are you who are poor...

Blessed are you who are hungry...

Blessed are you who weep...

Luke's 4th beatitude,

Blessed are you when people hate you, and when they exclude you, revile you and defame you... is clearly a later response to the

persecutions experienced by the writer's Christian community and not part of the original sayings of Jesus.

Similarly, Matthew has added another 5 Beatitudes to his list, taken mainly from the psalms which his Jewish Christian community would have known so well.

As 21st Century people committed to Mercy in Action, what then are we to make of the 3 original sayings of Jesus;

Blessed are you who are poor...

Blessed are you who are hungry...

Blessed are you who weep...

From someone who was criticized for enjoying the company of drinkers, sinners, prostitutes and party goers, these are strange words indeed.

Over the years, the church in its wisdom has interpreted these sayings in a number of ways. Poverty has been romanticized, generally by those not experiencing it. We have only to look at the horrific pictures of life in the Sudan to know that there is nothing romantic about grinding poverty; it is degrading, debilitating and dehumanizing. To suggest that poverty itself is blessed by God is immoral.

As distressing in my opinion, is the interpretation which says to the poor, "Don't worry about being poor, sad and hungry in this life, because God has something better for you in the next". It is the *pie in the sky when you die* interpretation, rightly condemned by Karl Marx as the opiate of the people: an interpretation of scripture used to justify greed, exploitation and degradation, and one finally put to rest by the base ecclesial communities of South America and the work of liberation theologians such as Leonardo Boff and Albert Nolan.

Nothing about the life and teachings of Jesus would suggest that this is what he meant. Every account we have of his actions shows a

person who challenged and relieved poverty, misery and hunger whenever he encountered it. Whatever else this interpretation is, it is certainly not Christian.

The third interpretation is more subtle. It is one favoured by Matthew's community. Matthew as we have seen moves the sayings into the third person, the traditional form of beatitude within Judaism, and he then spiritualises or ethicises them. The *poor* become the *poor in spirit*. *The hungry* become *those who hunger and thirst after righteousness* and those who *weep* are replaced by those who *mourn*, a word reminiscent, not of acute human loss but of sorrow for sin.

Why does Matthew do this or more accurately, why did Matthew's community do this? The answer I think, is that as early as 40 years after the death of Jesus, his words presented too great a challenge for the Christian community. We know that the early Christian community was characterized by great compassion for the powerless and dispossessed. The dignity of the marginalized, especially of women and slaves was restored, and goods were held in common and shared especially amongst the poor and widowed. But as the years rolled on and Jesus did not return as expected, the church moved away from this radical God who favoured the marginalized and outcast, and replaced him with a God who blessed the meek, the merciful, the pure in heart and the peacemakers.

This was a much more reasonable and manageable God, one that enabled the growing church to meld more easily into the socio economic world of its time, one which found the challenge of Jesus' words too confronting. So Matthew's community spiritualised the 3 authentic sayings of Jesus and added an additional 5 Beatitudes, ones with which no one could argue, ones, which, even today, are more frequently quoted and expounded upon than the hard, direct words originally spoken by Jesus.

And what of us? How do we respond to Jesus' words? We know how Catherine McAuley responded. She took up the challenge of

Jesus and built her House of Mercy right in the middle of fashionable Dublin. She used all her resources, not just to alleviate poverty and suffering but to challenge the conditions which produced it. For Catherine, education, especially the education of women, was the way to respond to the challenge of a God whose heart goes out to the powerless and marginalised, a God who has favourites and whose favourites are the poor, the sad and the hungry: a God who calls them blessed and calls us to reverse the conditions that oppress them.

As educators, our primary business is excellent learning and teaching, but for us, it is excellent learning and teaching which equips both ourselves and our students to embrace the challenge of Jesus; which enables both ourselves and our students to become agents of reversal; who bring the poor into the community of God, who enable the hungry to eat and the sorrowful to laugh again. As individuals, as well as institutions, we need to make sure we and our students have the skills to critique and reverse a society where refugees are detained for years on end, where suspected terrorists are judged guilty until proven innocent, where the lowest paid workers are forced to negotiate with their employers and where the original owners of this land are destroyed by alcoholism and domestic violence.

These are confronting issues, but Christianity, especially Mercy Christianity is not for the fainthearted. If we are to be true to the God of Jesus, the God whose heart goes out to the poor, the sad and the hungry then we must be prepared to raise these challenges with our students, our staff members and our communities; and Catherine McAuley herself, who responded to them with such intelligence, courage and love in her time, will surely be our constant companion.