



Listen to Jesus

Matthew 5:1–12

*“Blessed are the poor in spirit, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven.
Blessed are those who mourn, for they will be comforted.
Blessed are the meek, for they will inherit the earth.
Blessed are those who hunger and thirst for righteousness,
for they will be filled.
Blessed are the merciful, for they will be shown mercy.
Blessed are the pure in heart, for they will see God.
Blessed are the peacemakers, for they will be called children of God
Blessed are those who are persecuted because of righteousness,
for theirs is the kingdom of heaven.*

January 29, 2017

Thoughts for the Week

Scriptures: Zephaniah 2:3 3:12,13 • 1 Corinthians 1: 26-31 • Matthew 5:1-12a

Every once in a while someone will ask me how many Community of Christ members there are in the world. I am not sure why that figure is important to people, but I suspect that perhaps they have a sense of pride in our numbers. Just for the record, by the latest estimate, according to published figures there are roughly 250,000 Community of Christ members in the world. Don't ask me who took the census.

Here's how the rest of the world views us. This explanation is taken from the Wikipedia Website:

Community of Christ (known from 1872 to 2001 as the Reorganized Church of Jesus Christ of Latter Day Saints (RLDS)) is an American-based international church with roots in the Latter Day Saint movement. The church reports approximately 250,000 members in 50 nations. The church traces its origins to Joseph Smith's establishment of the Church of Christ on April 6, 1830, with the church formally reorganizing on April 6, 1860, following the death of Smith in 1844.

The Community of Christ is rooted in Restorationist traditions. Although in some respects it is congruent with mainline Protestant Christian attitudes, it is in many ways theologically distinct, continuing such features as prophetic revelation. It is the second-largest denomination within the Latter Day Saint movement.

Community of Christ follows a largely non-liturgical tradition based loosely on the Revised Common Lectionary. From its headquarters in Independence, Missouri, the church offers a special focus on evangelism, peace and justice ministries, spirituality and wholeness, youth ministries and outreach ministries. Church teachings emphasize that "all are called" as "persons of worth" to "share the peace of Christ".

Are numbers the true sign of the effectiveness of any religion? Let's take a look.

In the history of the Jewish religion we find, for instance, that the prophets such as Zephaniah (in today's first reading) Jeremiah and Isaiah did not reach any large numbers in their preaching. They often found that few Jews were actually willing to carry their faith to any depth. The message of their prophetic preaching was simply too difficult, too challenging for many to accept. So, the prophets chose rather to preach to the remnant, the few who were truly willing to devote themselves to God's law. That is the reason why prophets were often unpopular people; they found little support among the people at large.

As we read through the life of Jesus in the gospels, we find that he too, like the Old Testament biblical prophets, was realistic enough to know that only a small group of his fellow Israelites had the courage to join him as he spoke of the Kingdom of God.

That for instance is why we hear Jesus in Matthew's gospel preaching to another remnant and not to the masses. He spoke of real people: the poor, the sorrowing, the lowly, those who are hungry and thirsty for holiness, the merciful, the oppressed and the persecuted. They are the followers of Jesus who truly understand that the kingdom of God refers to God working out his vision in our every day life in the world amidst all the problems we face every day. This seems to be a vision of

Christianity not always very acceptable to the masses.

In our own times we also hear from some who truly believe that numbers do not count. And many suggest that the church of the future will be a much smaller church, composed of the few who are willing to find the Christ of justice and peace in the world of their everyday lives, not merely in their attendance at Sunday services.

A somewhat famous Jesuit biblical archaeologist, Robert North, observed, "the reason Christianity is not working is that we have too many Christians. It's clear from the gospels that Jesus never intended his followers to be more than a very small group".

The theologian, Karl Rahner (now deceased) once said: "When Christians reach more than 20% of the population they will no longer have any effect in changing the culture around them. At that point they become Christians primarily because it is the acceptable thing to do, not because they are really committed to carrying on the ministry of Jesus."

Finally, another famous theologian, Daniel Berrigan, once said: "The only true Christian is the radical Christian, the one who is willing to discover and follow Jesus' radical message of the kingdom of God."

So, what should we make of all this? Do numbers really count, whether large or small? If there is an answer, I think it comes not from the number counters but rather from each of us who must individually decide over and over again during our lifetime what it means to be a follower of Christ. I suspect that at certain times that challenge may even become a little uncomfortable for us but, of course, Jesus never promised that being his follower would be a life without challenge. Actually, as Christians, none of us would want it to be that way, would we?

Blessed are the Poor in Spirit

Jesus' Sermon on the Mount begins by talking about the kingdom of heaven. Well, what is a kingdom anyway? A kingdom has a king, subjects, a place, and the ways of the king and his kingdom. It's where this particular king is reigning. So when Jesus teaches, He is not just advocating rules or giving advice. He is talking about a place or, more accurately, a realm where the ruler is God.

And what is God's kingdom like? What is God like as a king? Who are His subjects? And what are the ways of God? You can see that Jesus speaks about all these things in the beatitudes. We learn about who the subjects of this kingdom are: the poor in spirit, those who mourn, etc. We are learning about the king. He is the One who gives the kingdom, who comforts, gives the earth to His children, and so on. Jesus is telling them about the wonder and goodness of living under the reign of God.

We see that God greatly desires to bless His people in a full and complete way. God is not going to give sparingly--just some comfort, or a small inheritance. And what God is doing to His people now, when He is blessing them is, He is making them able more and more to hope, receive, and long for the very riches He is giving.

Who are the blessed? Well, we who are His followers are the blessed. And the next time you find yourself mourning over the loss of a loved one or a friendship, or mourning over the distortion and destruction that sin causes, remember this is a sign that you are blessed--God is at work in you and He will give His presence, peace, and comfort someday perfectly.

The Lord's Prayer

Matthew 6:9-13

The Lord's Prayer is Jesus' model of a perfect prayer. Many of us pray this prayer in church but seldom stop and think about what it really means.

Our Father who art in heaven, Hallowed be thy name. We know that God is the master of the entire universe. He is holy and all-powerful. But, like a father, He also loves and protects us. We wish for all people to honor God and His holy name.

Thy kingdom come, Thy will be done on earth, as it is in heaven. God's spiritual kingdom is within the hearts and minds of those people who put their faith and trust in God and obey His commands (Matthew 3:2, Luke 17:20-21) We pray for more

and more people to trust and obey God and become part of His kingdom (Mark 4:30-32).

Give us this day our daily bread. We know that everything we have is a gift from God. We ask God to give us the food and other things we need for daily life.

And forgive us our debts, as we forgive our debtors. In a way, our sins are like "debts" owed to God. We ask God to forgive us for doing things that are wrong and for failing to do the good things we should. We know that we must also forgive other people who have done wrong to us. We cannot expect God to forgive our sins while we are holding a grudge or seeking revenge against another person (Matthew 6:14-15, 18:23-35).

And suffer us not to be led into temptation, but deliver us from evil. Every day we are tempted to commit sins such as greed, immorality, hatred, revenge, theft and gossip (Matthew 15:19-20, Luke 12:15, Galatians 5:19-21). We pray for the strength to resist these temptations of daily life (James 1:12-16). We ask God to protect us from Satan's power to fool us into thinking wrong is actually right (Genesis 3:4-5, 1 Corinthians 10:13, 2 Corinthians 11:3, 11:13-15).

For Thine is the kingdom, and the power, and the glory, forever. This *doxology*, or brief hymn of praise, was not part of Jesus' original prayer. It comes from 1 Chronicles 29:11 and was probably added for use in public worship.

Amen. This word from Hebrew means "truly." It is often added at the end of prayers to mean, "Let it be so!"