

All Saints Sunday
6 November 2005
St. George's Episcopal Church
Le Mars, Iowa
The Rev. Dr. Karen A. H. Wacome, Presiding
Dr. Donald H. Wacome, Lay Preaching

Ecclesiasticus 44.10, 13-14
Psalm 149
Revelation 7.2-4, 9-17
Matthew 5.1-12

*May the words of my mouth
And the meditations of our hearts
Be acceptable in Your sight
O God, our strength and our redeemer!
Amen*

Down From the Mountain

Who is Jesus talking to? What strikes me first about this text is its crucial ambiguity on this question. Matthew situates the “Sermon on the Mount” very close to the beginning of Jesus’ ministry. Hearing that John the Baptist has been arrested, Jesus immediately recruits his own disciples and travels through Galilee, preaching the Good News: *Repent, for the Kingdom of heaven has come near!* And Jesus *shows* that what he says is true. When he acts the future kingdom breaks into the present. He heals people, curing them of every disease and every sickness and every pain. Epileptics and the demon possessed are rescued from their torments. Paralytics get up and walk. Jesus’ fame spreads. People converge from all around. Soon Jesus is pursued by large crowds everywhere he goes (4.23-25).

Our text opens with his response: “*When Jesus saw the crowds, he went up the mountain.*” Does he go up the mountain so he can better speak to the crowd? Or does he climb up there to get away from them, to speak with his disciples privately and exclude the pursuing masses? Matthew writes that Jesus *sat down*; that doesn’t seem to be the thing to do if you want to be heard by a large crowd. His disciples gathered around and

Jesus taught *them*. It *seems* pretty clear that Matthew's Jesus addresses what tradition came to know as the "Beatitudes" not to the swarming crowds, but to the disciples he has recently caught in the fishing towns along the shore of the Sea of Galilee.

But where are the crowds? Does Jesus mean to speak to them too, or just to his disciples? Are they, like the hapless character in *The Life of Brian* who thinks he hears "*Blessed are the cheese makers*"—hanging on the periphery, further down the slopes, trying to catch a word from above intended for others? Matthew doesn't say. However, he lets us know that when Jesus finishes speaking and comes down off the mountain, the crowds are still there, and follow him in hope of more miraculous healings (8.1). *And* we know that they heard enough to be astounded at Jesus' teaching, and to receive his words as though given for them: "*For he taught them as one having authority, and not as their scribes*" (7.29). Indeed, it's almost as though Jesus was speaking to them all along. For now Matthew has nothing to say about what effect, if any, Jesus' pronouncement of blessing had upon the disciples; he only records the effect of Jesus' words on the crowds.

So Matthew seems to leave it up in the air: is Jesus speaking to a select few, the committed band of disciples? (We have yet to see how inept they will be as disciples.) That's what the beginning of the narrative, found in our lesson, seems to say. Or, as Matthew seems to suggest two chapters later, as Jesus descends from the mountain, was he really talking to that crowd that must have represented every sort of motive for being there: the sick and desperate, the idle, the curious, the pious hoping for the next prophet, zealots on the lookout for the Messiah, informers on the payroll of Herod, the

collaborationist king, hostile lackeys of the religious authorities in Jerusalem, good Jews, bad Jews, suspicious Pharisees, bemused gentiles...“all manner and condition” of people?

Who’s blessed, or to whom does Jesus at least hold out the possibility of being blessed, *happy*, which is pretty much all Matthew’s Greek word means? It’s not the term one would use to speak of a blessing in a specifically religious sense, an official singling out of someone as marked with God’s favor, like the thing Jacob got from blind old Isaac by pretending to be his hairy brother Esau, but it would have had the connotation of being in God’s favor. (I suppose translators avoid “happy” because it’s become such an insipid word in English.)

I think this ambiguity is intentional, and that Matthew has a good reason to begin his narrative with Jesus pretty clearly addressing a small group of committed followers while concluding it with the crowds having been moved by his words. That, I think, is how things look if we pay attention to what Jesus *does* here, not only to what he *says*. Too often, readers of the Gospels reduce Jesus to a “talking head,” not the good, David Byrne, 1980’s, punk kind, but to the boring PBS *News Hour* kind, that is, someone who has mildly edifying things to say but does not act, and in so doing turn Jesus into a palatable, even if somewhat eccentric, moral teacher, whose teachings are, as it happens, summarized here in the Sermon on the Mount. To get past this, our focus needs to shift to what Jesus *does*, or tries to do, with his words, with *these* words in *this* setting for *these* people.

Commentators have long picked up on the analogy between Jesus speaking the word of God from the mountain, and Moses bringing God's Law down from Mount Sinai. Back there in *Exodus*, what ultimately matters is not the words of the Law (the all too famous "Ten Commandments")—surely the people already knew they should not steal and commit adultery and so on. It's what God *does* there through Moses when he gives the people the Law: he's taking a bunch of freed slaves and creating a people, his own people. He's calling them and with his call making them his own. He's covenanting with them, tying them to him and himself to them.

Jesus here in Matthew re-enacts the great historical event, Yahweh's calling of Israel to be Israel, God calling his people into existence and binding himself to them. Yet it's more than a reenactment. It is Jesus' challenge to Israel to be the *true* Israel, for it to forsake a natural and obvious, yet fatally mistaken, conception of what it is to be God's elect people, and to repent, to turn to its God, the God who makes himself present for them in some unimaginable way in Jesus himself. Jesus' aim is to make Israel be at last what it is supposed to be. Nowhere is this more clearly spelled out than in N. T.

Wright's—he's the bishop of Durham—magisterial *Jesus and the Victory of God*. To a people intent on making their call to be God's elect people conform to their proud ethnic and national identity, Jesus says, "*Happy are the poor in spirit, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven;*" and to those who anticipate God's wrathful justice poured out on evildoers on their behalf, Jesus says, "*Happy are the merciful, for they will receive mercy.*" To those trusting that their record of good conduct and dedication to ritual purity will deliver them from exile and bring them at last to God's presence, Jesus says, "*Happy are the pure in*

heart, for they shall see God.” To a people awaiting vindication by the God whose messiah will destroy their enemies, Jesus say, “Happy are the peacemakers, for they will be called the children of God.” To a people who long to turn the tables on those who persecute them, and wreak vengeance on those who have overrun and polluted the land of promise, Jesus says, “Happy are those who are persecuted for righteousness’ sake, for theirs in the kingdom of heaven.”

The first nine beatitudes Jesus phrases in the third person: *“Blessed are those who...”* Only with the last does he shift to the second person: *“Blessed are you when people revile you and persecute you and utter all kinds of evil against you falsely on my account.”* I can imagine Jesus, having directed the first nine pronouncements downwards to the crowd, now turning to look into the eyes of his disciples as he promises that the happiness of God’s favor comes to those who, because of friendship with Jesus, will be rejected and condemned. Even here, at the beginning of his ministry, on a day when Jesus must have been the most popular human being in the eastern Mediterranean, he knows that he is speaking fighting words, and that outraged pride and piety, persecution, and probable violent rejection lie ahead. God’s call for Israel to be its true self, a light to the world, a city set on a hill, the priestly kingdom that gives itself to bring the nations to God, is sure to divide those who will receive the call from those who will hate it. For hating it makes all kinds of sense: it’s the demand that they give up everything they’ve invested in to secure a place in God’s kingdom, the kingdom that Jesus now reveals as graciously and freely given to everyone. There will be some who hear, and who are thus drawn into God’s kingdom, but many who will turn away, disappointed and angry.

Matthew accurately portrays an ambiguous, shifting, yet to be drawn, line between Jesus' true disciples and the many who will not obey the invitation to the coming kingdom. No one can be too sure of his place, of his right to be called a disciple.

Yet Matthew does not give us the last word. We're all aware that corresponding to Matthew's *Sermon on the Mount* there's Luke's *Sermon on the Plain*. (It is, in fact, the alternate reading for today's lesson.) Whether there's one event, differently remembered, or one event differently reconstructed by the respective evangelists in virtue of their specific theological aims, or two different events in which Jesus spoke similar words, no one knows. It doesn't much matter. What matters is that the two stories together more fully show us the God we meet in Jesus, and what it means to be called to his kingdom.

Luke's account begins with Jesus already on the mountain, where he has been praying all night (6.12). As day breaks, Jesus and an inner circle of disciples come down the mountain to a level place, where a great crowd of people has collected, eager to hear him and to be healed by him. Here there is no question of Jesus evading the crowd; he comes to it. There is no question of Jesus speaking to a select group of disciples, not even to the handful who spent the night with him on the mountain. There is no sense of distance between Jesus and the eager, needy mass of people: they are pressing upon him, being cured of their diseases merely by touching him. Jesus is down in the crowd, engulfed in the mass of helpless humanity, divine power draining out of him to give them life. Luke writes that when Jesus begins to speak, he looks *up* at his disciples (6.20); *they* must still

be up the slope, away from the crowd into which Jesus has descended, into which he has fully entered.

Luke's tone, like his setting, is intimate. Jesus speaks from the start in the second person. "*Blessed are you who are poor, for yours is the kingdom of God.*" Mark leaves it unclear who the spiritually poor who populate the kingdom of heaven might be, here in Luke it can only be the indiscriminate mob that surrounds Jesus. We might say that in Matthew, Jesus is still talking *about* the kingdom of heaven and inviting someone into it; in Luke he is talking *to* it, to the poor, the reviled, the persecuted, to those who know their only hope is a God gracious enough, merciful enough, to send Jesus.

In Matthew, Jesus announces the blessedness of God's coming kingdom, but that happiness sounds a long way off, and it sounds pretty solemn, and it sounds like it might really be for someone else. In Luke Jesus makes it sound like, well, happiness: "*Blessed are you who weep now, for you will laugh.*"

The two texts are not at odds. The startling nature of the call to be God's people, with its potential to unsettle, alienate and divide is present in Luke, just as the joy of God's relentless grace is present in Mark. Luke's Jesus pronounces judgment on those who will not accept God's way of making a kingdom and saving a world, and instead pin their hopes on what looks like the sure thing now: "*Woe to you who are rich, for you have received your consolation. Woe to you who are full now, for you shall be hungry*" (6.24-25).

Whether from up on the mountain or down on the plain the God who was in Christ spoke to Israel, calling it to its true self, calling it to be the nucleus of the universal kingdom, which will draw everyone, Jew and gentile, good and bad, to God. So Jesus' words are no less directed to us, showing us where our happiness lies. The Jewish nation to which Jesus preached was elect, but it was not special. Those who were initially attracted to Jesus and flocked after him in huge crowds, but later in great numbers rejected him rather than allow their identity as those who are right and in the right to be called into question, were simply human beings. They were just like us: but for a sheer excess of grace always, as W. H. Auden said,

*Unwilling to climb the cross of the moment,
and let our illusions die.*

It's a good idea to wonder where we might find ourselves there, on the mountain or on the plain, confronted with Jesus' words. I fear that it is all too easy to identify myself, a privileged disciple, safely up the hill a bit, not down and dirty with Jesus in the Lucan crowd; resembling more closely than I like to admit the Israel replete with a sense of its own purity and exclusiveness, more than likely to reject him.

Maybe, too, I'm up there, a little alarmed at Jesus' proclivity to hang out with the morally and theologically third rate, skeptical about whether all this unfettered, undeserved love might be too much of a good thing, worrying what that crowd might get up to if they start thinking God really accepts them as they are. I hope not. Better by far to find ourselves poor, and hungry, and grieving, in need of consolation that Jesus alone

gives. Better to find ourselves down in the crowd, sick and hurting, hoping for a healing touch from Jesus. And better to find ourselves under judgment, in need of mercy, but against all odds forgiven, than to find ourselves in the preposterous situation of judging others as unacceptable to God.

One of the great monastic saints of the Egyptian Desert in the 4th century was named (of all things) *Makarios*, later revered as *Makarios the Great*. Two stories come from the time when he must have been simply “Brother Happy.” The monastery to which Makarios belonged would on occasion gather to deal with members who behaved badly. At one conclave, a monk was justly condemned and, because of the seriousness of his crime, expelled from the brotherhood. As he left, Makarios rose to his feet and followed him out, saying, “*I too am a sinner.*” Another time when an assembly was called to judge one of the monks, Makarios came from his cell carrying a jug of water with a crack in it. As he walked the water ran out the hole. “*What are you doing?*” his fellow monks asked. Makarios replied, “*I’m going to condemn another while my sins run out behind me like water on the sand.*” (Related by Rowan Williams in “One Holy Catholic and Apostolic Church,” Archbishop’s Address to the 3rd Global South to South Encounter, Ain al Sukhna, Egypt, 28 October 2005.)

Jesus for our sake came down from the mountain, identified himself with that crowd of hopeless sinners, and gave himself for them, choosing to be condemned rather than condemn. He found us in that crowd. Our prayer should be that we would find ourselves there at his side.

Amen