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Matthew 2.^{1-3, 7-11}

Now when Jesus was born in Bethlehem of Judæa in the days of Herod the king, behold, there came wise men from the east to Jerusalem, ²saying, “Where is he that is born King of the Jews? For we have seen his star in the east, and are come to worship him”

³When Herod the king had heard these things, he was troubled, and all Jerusalem with him...

⁷Then Herod, when he had privily called the wise men, enquired of them diligently what time the star appeared. ⁸And he sent them to Bethlehem, and said, “Go and search diligently for the young child; and when ye have found him, bring me word again, that I may come and worship him also.”

⁹When they had heard the king, they departed; and, lo, the star, which they saw in the east, went before them, till it came and stood over where the young child was. ¹⁰When they saw the star, they rejoiced with exceeding great joy. ¹¹And when they were come into the house, they saw the young child with Mary his mother, and fell down, and worshipped him: and when they had opened their treasures, they presented unto him gifts; gold, and frankincense, and myrrh.

meditation

This traditional Christmas story introduces us to three main characters whose careers overlapped in meaningful ways: Jesus, Herod, and wisemen of indeterminate number, who we will treat as one character. Here is what we know or can surmise about these three figures from Matthew’s second chapter.

We begin with the Magi. As their name suggests, they were likely from Persia where they engaged in some form of religious philosophy and were thought to possess the gift of divination and prophecy. Through the exercise of study, thought, and discernment, they were able to identify some celestial event as harbinger of a new “king of the Jews” about to be born. This celestial event led them to travel to Jerusalem where they hoped to locate and pay homage to the new king. Being informed that the child was more likely in Bethlehem, they travel there, where they found the child, worshiped him, and bestowed gifts suitable for a king. Then, seemingly discerning Herod’s nefarious reasons for sending them to find the child, the Magi returned home without reporting to Herod as he had requested.

Now, for Herod. The Roman Senate had appointed Herod a client king of the Roman empire, with Judah as his fiefdom. Given Herod’s questionable claims to the throne in the eyes of the populace and his unpopularity, Herod and his administrators were very alarmed upon hearing of the Magi’s inquiry into a new Jewish king.

After summoning the Magi, Herod sent them to Bethlehem where they were to find the child and report back to him. Realizing that the Magi had departed without reporting back, Herod had all children under three executed in an attempt to kill the would-be king.

This brings us to the third and principal character, Jesus. In this narrative, we learn that Jesus is to be “king of the Jews.” We learn that he was born in Bethlehem. We learn that his birth was occasion for the death of many children. We learn that Jesus was delivered from this same fate by becoming a refugee in the Egypt.

What are we to make of this story? Many things, no doubt. While Jesus is surely the principal character in this tale, he is passive throughout. There are two active participants: the Magi and Herod. What can we learn from their actions?

The Magi were discerning, relying on promptings and scriptural direction to achieve their wish to see and pay homage to Judah's future king. But their discernment extended beyond this. Their discernment extended to discerning Herod's insincerity and nefarious plans. Their discernment played a small role in Jesus' rescue from Herod's violent impulses and intents. Through them, we are reminded of the importance of discernment. We are reminded of the importance of relying upon divine directions and forces often outside ourselves or our control. We are reminded of the importance of relying upon God to achieve our own desires and being a benefit to others.

When it comes to Herod, the text seems to focus not just on the man, Herod, but on his position and title. "Jesus was born in Bethlehem of Judæa in the days of Herod *the king*, the narrative begins. "Where is he that is born *King* of the Jews?" ask the magi. "When Herod *the king* had heard these things, he was troubled." Herod did not hear good news in the Magi's revelation, he heard coup news. After some investigating, Herod learned where and when the would-be king was to be born and so sent the magi off to discover the child, uncover the plot. When the magi "had heard *the king*, they departed."

Thus, with this text, we are faced with, among other things, a political document. With Herod, we are reminded of the insecurity of, and dangers posed by this world's leaders. The rulers of this world are jealous of their positions of power. They do not lightly give them up. They are not slow to use violence against those whom they see as a threat. In addition, they seem to naturally intuit, as Mary spiritually discerned, that Jesus is, at the very least, a nuisance, and, at most, a threat to their power: "He hath put down the might from their seats."1

Politics does not fill us with fuzzy feelings of sentimentality so prevalent during the Christmas Season and might seem to have no place in Christmas narratives. Yet, this beloved Christmas narrative with much else in the Bible most certainly sees Jesus as a political figure. It reminds us that Jesus is "King of the Jews." Indeed, he is King of Kings, King of the world. Though the nations of this world find this gulling and resist bending the knee to him, they will yield, eventually.

This narrative reminds us that there is a very real tug of war for the hearts and minds of humankind. In this war for influence and power, we have to ask ourselves, "How friendly or hostile to my Lord are the earthly powers under whose influence I live? To whom does my allegiance rightfully belong? Who is my king?"

Even so, come, Lord Jesus!

Matthew 5.¹⁻¹²

¹And seeing the multitudes, he went up into a mountain: and when he was set, his disciples came unto him: ²And he opened his mouth, and taught them, saying,

³Blessed are the poor in spirit: for theirs is the kingdom of heaven.

⁴Blessed are they that mourn: for they shall be comforted.

⁵Blessed are the meek: for they shall inherit the earth.

⁶Blessed are they which do hunger and thirst after righteousness: for they shall be filled.

⁷Blessed are the merciful: for they shall obtain mercy.

⁸Blessed are the pure in heart: for they shall see God.

⁹Blessed are the peacemakers: for they shall be called the children of God.

¹⁰Blessed are they which are persecuted for righteousness' sake: for theirs is the kingdom of heaven.

¹¹Blessed are ye, when men shall revile you, and persecute you, and shall say all manner of evil against you falsely, for my sake.

¹²Rejoice, and be exceeding glad: for great is your reward in heaven: for so persecuted they the prophets which were before you.

meditation 1— introductory

The Sermon on the Mount contains some of Jesus' best known and difficult sayings and teachings. In it we find such things as his beloved Beatitudes, his difficult warnings about judgement, retribution and loving one's enemies, his indispensable directions concerning prayer, his song worthy parable of the house built on a rock, and, based on world history since its utterance, his impossible counsel concerning money and economic materialism. Even those who know little of him and those who do not believe him to be God or God's son, even they know and respect his world-changing suggestion that we treat others as we would like to be treated.

If we knew nothing else about this man or his teachings, what we do know of him and his teachings from this sermon of just under 2500 English words would be enough to mark him out as an extraordinary thinker and teacher of high ideals. If the world adopted only his counsel about money and materialism, or his counsel concerning our enemies, or his counsel to treat others as we would be treated, the world would be a far, far different place. If the world were to adopt all the sermon's principal teachings, it would be so thoroughly revolutionized as to lose its celestial status and move into the realm of the celestial. But, we cannot be too hard on "the world," I suppose, when, alas, even those of us who profess to admire, worship, and follow him fall far, far short of his high ideals.

Much that Jesus taught in this sermon is, truly, difficult. It is intimidating. When we see how far short of its ideals we fall, we can grow anxious. That's o.k. A little anxiety never killed anyone. More dangerous than anxiety is the ignorance that enters in when we begin to rationalize and domesticate Jesus' teachings; when we conclude that he didn't really mean what he said, or that he meant something different than what the words on the page suggest, or that he wasn't talking to everyone who would ever hear or read his words.

Because of the sermon's difficulty, perhaps, we read it less often than we should. Maybe we don't want to be challenged. Maybe we feel guilty. Maybe we have other things to read. Maybe we have other things we would rather do. Whatever the reason, we should probably repent. We should probably have it on a very regular reading schedule. We should probably be in constant motion trying to fulfill the high ideals. And when we are overcome with the difficulty of following Jesus' teachings and with the ease with which we fail, we should probably engage more fully and faithfully in that act about which Jesus taught in the sermon: the act of prayer.

Even so, come, Lord Jesus!

meditation 2— introductory

Jesus' beatitudes contain some of his best known and beloved teachings. Like much that is found in the "Sermon on the Mount," the beatitudes are also known to stretch our spiritual capacities. Perhaps it is this sermon's uncomfortable stretching of our spiritual capacities that led Jesus to begin by comforting those who felt themselves destitute of spiritual energies and capacities: "Blessed are the poor in spirit."¹

We will devote a meditation to each of the beatitudes. In this meditation, we wish to make some general observations concerning the title, "Beatitude," and the nature of existence that "blessed" suggests.

The title, "Beatitude," comes from Latin, *beati*, "blessed, happy, fortunate, rich," with which the Greek word, *makarioi*, was translated. This Greek word has the same range of meaning. The Hebrew word, if Jesus indeed spoke Hebrew when he delivered this message (he often spoke Aramaic), is *'ašrê*. The word can mean "blessed," "happy," "content," "secure," "fortunate," "satisfied," "fulfilled." It seems likely that this Hebrew word is derived from the root, *'šr*, meaning, "to go forward," "to walk on," "to march steadily." Thus, it can mean "to make progress," "to advance."

Translation is not a science. Human language is imperfect. Misunderstandings in speech and translation are inevitable. The translation of these three words—*beati*, *makarioi*, and *'ašrê*.—is a case in point.

The traditional translation, "blessed," works just fine. However, given its most common usage today, it might fall short of the idea that Jesus had in mind. Today, when we think of one who is "blessed," we might most often think of an individual in whose life God has *directly* acted to bestow or insert some specific benefit (blessing) at a given time and place. While such an individual could be called, "blessed," the "blessedness" of which these three words consist does not require a *direct* act of God and is more generalized than a specific moment or event in time and space. An individual might be called "blessed" who simply lives a life consistent with principles—divine or culturally normative—that lead to a sense of general and consistent happiness, contentment, peacefulness. Some might argue that this latter form of happiness is also God-given since God inspires the principles upon which the happiness is based. In this case the "blessedness" is an *indirect* act of God. I am O.K., with this, but in today's usage we often think in terms of a specific moment or event in which God acts directly. "Blessed," works as a translation as long as we understand that it as a more general and pervasive sense of happiness, contentment, fulfillment, or peace than any transitory moment of wellness.

For many, "happy" works best. Indeed, it seems to have grown to be the most common translation. However, this word too has drawbacks. We can use "happy" for many things. We can be happy to go to the fair. We can be happy at eating our favorite food. We use "happy," then, in a diluted form for many life events that seem too trivial for the sort of "happiness" that Jesus brings or hopes to bring into our lives.

¹ Or, if Matthew is seen as stitching Jesus' teachings together in order to create one sermon—Luke sprinkles Jesus' teachings found in Matthew's single "Sermon on the Mount" throughout his work—then Matthew is responsible for this beginning's nod to the difficulties that lay ahead in the sermon.

I am often tempted to translate the word, “progressive,” as in “advancing,” “developing, improving.” But this is not very poetic, sounds weird, and, today, has political connotations. Yet, when one thinks of the psychology of true human happiness, the idea of being what one should be and finding improvement in one’s life is central. In addition, God, we are told, wants us to be “happy.” But theology seems to locate this human happiness in the form of advancement. In traditional Christian theology that advancement is from this flawed human existence on earth to a perfected existence in heaven. LDS theology can hardly conceive of “happiness” outside the terms of “eternal progression.”

So, there is something to be said for each translation: “blessed,” “happy,” and “progressive.” Whatever word is finally utilized, the reader should be aware that “blessedness” has something of each of these three things in it. God wishes us to be happy and secure and contented in life. He wished to see us advance in character and capacity. He plays an enormous role in our lives as we seek these divine goals.

However, we bear a good deal of responsibility for our own happiness and progress. And much of this responsibility comes in the form of following the standards He has so generously provided to produce that happiness and progress. In the Sermon on the Mount, Jesus advances the standard established by “the scribes and pharisees” (See Mt. 5.²⁰) calling us to exceed their standard. It is often a demanding and intimidating standard. We can be forgiven for feeling overwhelmed at times by it. Nevertheless, we must remember from beginning to end that first beatitude that set the entire sermon in motion: “Blessed are those who lack spiritual energies and capacities.” Although it may seem impossible, “with God all things are possible” (See Mk. 9.²³).

Even so, come, Lord Jesus!

meditation 3—introductory

Before examining each of the nine beatitudes, we wish to note the form that they all have in common. Each one is composed of two parts. In the first part, we have a statement of what we call “condition.” Jesus addresses individuals who are “poor in spirit,” “meek,” “merciful” “pure in heart,” “peacemakers.” He speaks to those who “mourn,” “hunger and thirst after righteousness,” “are persecuted,” and “revile[d].” In the second part of each beatitude, we have a statement of what we call “promise.” In this second part, Jesus promises “the kingdom of heaven” and “mercy.” He promises individuals that they “shall be comforted,” “shall inherit the earth,” “be filled,” “see God,” “be called the children of God,” and receive a “great...reward in heaven.”

There is no doubt that all the “promises” are positive and desirable. We likely aspire to all of them. However, we may possess less certainty about the “conditions.” Some of the “conditions” may seem positive and desirable. They may represent “conditions” for which we aspire. We may aspire, for example, to be “merciful” or “pure in heart.” Others may seem less desirable. We may not aspire to have them in our lives. We may not wish, for example, to “mourn” or be “persecuted.” We may be uncertain about others. Is it good or bad to be “poor in spirit”? Is “poverty” ever a condition for which we aspire? Do we aspire to “hunger and thirst after righteousness” with its implication that we actually lack, rather desperately it seems, righteousness—else why would we be hungry and thirsty?

As we consider these “conditions,” their desirability, and whether we aspire to possess them or not, we might benefit from remembering that Luke, too, recorded some of Jesus’ beatitudes. The “promises” as recorded by Luke are not significantly different than those recorded by Matthew.

However, the “conditions” do possess a marked difference. Here are the “conditions” of the four beatitudes as Luke reports them.

“Blessed be ye poor”

“Blessed are ye that hunger now”

“Blessed are ye that weep now”

“Blessed are ye, when men shall hate you, and when they shall separate you from their company, and shall reproach you, and cast out your name as evil, for the Son of man's sake.”

Almost certainly there is not a single one of us who aspire to a single one of the “conditions” as Luke records them. We *might, possibly*, think it good to be “poor in spirit,” but we certainly do not aspire to simply be “poor.” Likewise, we do not aspire to be hungry. Period. Even a short fast is a trial for some. Try being hungry all day long every day. Nor do we wish to mourn or be persecuted.

So, one of the questions we should consider is whether or not Luke’s recording of the beatitudes might or should guide our understanding of the beatitudes, especially the “condition” part of each, as Matthew records them.² If not, why not? Do we examine them separately, as if they have nothing to do with each other? In this case, it seems, we would be concluding, essentially, that one or the other or neither actually came from Jesus but were the creation of the two Gospel writers. Do we give priority to one version over the other? If so, which is preferred and on what basis do we pass such judgement?

To treat them separately, it seems to me, causes as many problems as it *seems* to solve. To prioritize one over the other is, in my mind, unjustified. I suggest that in the final analysis they may not be so very different as we might imagine them to be at first glance.

Jesus’ standards for “righteousness” found in the Sermon on the Mount are certainly high. He does deliverer some difficult challenges. In some cases, they can seem impossibly high and difficult. Some seem, almost, to read at least some of the beatitudes as “commandments” or “admonitions.” But, with his initial beatitudes, Jesus is not so much challenging as he is comforting and inviting. In them, I hear the same kind of comfort and invitation that Matthew records Jesus offering later in his ministry:

“Come unto me, all ye that labour and are heavy laden, and I will give you rest” (Mt. 11.²⁸).

As I read the beatitudes, they are comfort, indeed. They are solace for souls intimidated by many of the afflictions with which the world so abounds.

Even so, come, Lord Jesus!

² Using Matthew’s beatitudes to guide us in the interpretation of Luke’s beatitudes seems more fraught.

Meditation 4 (vs. 3)

Blessed are the poor in spirit: for theirs is the kingdom of heaven.

I have serious doubts concerning the traditional understanding of Jesus' first beatitude. Here is the beatitude followed with the traditional understanding.

Beatitude

"Blessed are the poor in spirit: for theirs is the kingdom of heaven."

Traditional understanding

"Blessed are the humble: for theirs is the kingdom of heaven."

I should say, perhaps, that it is really the traditional understanding of "humility" to which I object. To be humble, I have heard more times than I can count, is "to be teachable." Well, if that's what it means to be humble, then, humility has nothing to do with Jesus' first beatitude. However, if by "humility" one means "humiliation," well then, the traditional notion that Jesus' first beatitude is about humility might just not be so far off the mark. Unfortunately, however, few enough people think of humility in terms of humiliation as to make it none. All such interpreters as think of "the poor in spirit" in terms of humility have so domesticated humility as to think that they want to be humble while none of them want to experience humiliation. Yet, it is of and to those who experience humiliation, I believe, that Jesus speaks in his first beatitude.

In this meditation I will offer my reasons for rejecting "the poor in spirit" as indicative of traditional humility and my reasons for accepting Jesus' "poor in spirit" as those who experience the humiliation of spiritual privation.

We have first to do with Jesus' saying, as recorded in Matthew. Jesus is unlikely to have preached in Greek, but in either Hebrew or Aramaic. Yet, we are stuck with Greek as no Hebrew or Aramaic original exists. We have no choice, then, but to put our faith in the faithfulness of the Greek translation of Jesus' original Hebrew/ Aramaic saying.

We begin with Jesus' "poor." This is Greek, *ptōchós*. It means to be "destitute," "mendicant."¹ It is indicative of "one who crouches and cowers." It is "to be beggarly," or to be a "beggar."² "It is worthy of note that in distinction from *pénēs*, which refers to those who are poor and have to work for a living, the *ptōchós* group refers to the total poverty which reduces people to begging."³ So, Jesus' "poor" indicates far more than deficiency. It points to a very real and very deep destitution and impoverishment that makes the individual so inflicted dependent upon others, reducing them to begging. Now that's humility. That's humiliation. The poverty of which Jesus is speaking, then, isn't to be found in a conscious willingness to accept teaching. It is found in a near total absence of necessities.

This brings us to our second word, "spirit." The impoverished individual whom Jesus blesses is one who is destitute of "spirit." "The Greek word for spirit is *pneuma*. It indicates that which gives energy and power and force and ability and vitality. "Always... there is force in *pneuma*. Power flows from

¹ See, *Theological Dictionary of the New Testament*.

² See, *Vines Complete Expository Dictionary*.

³ See, *Theological Dictionary of the New Testament*, Ed., Gerhard Kittel and Gerhard Friedrich, Eerdmans, Grand Rapids MI, 1968, p. 335.

it, is mediated by it, and disappears with it.”⁴ “The spirit of a person is the... principle of life within him or her.”⁵

To help us understand this fundamental element of spirit, we can think of ‘school spirit.’ School spirit is enthusiasm for, optimism about, and energy toward school. The ‘poor in spirit’ is one who possesses a desperate lack of spiritual energy, power, strength, force, ability, and vitality.

Then again, we can think of other ways we use “spirit.” We speak sometimes of the “spirit of the law.” What we really mean is the “meaning of the law.” So, to have “spirit” is to have “meaning.” The “poor in spirit,” then, might be thought of those who are “poor of meaning.” Life isn’t working for them. They can find no meaning in their life and their experiences. With this, there is little energy; little reason to be hopeful about their future.

It should be clear from the vocabulary that the “poor in spirit” whom Jesus blesses and to whom he offers hope are those who have had their spirit broken. They are deflated and dejected. Broken. They are anxious and worried. They are weak and impotent. But, we need not rely upon lexical resources for this conclusion. In this case, we also possess Luke’s record of this beatitude.

“Blessed be ye poor” (Luke 6.²⁰).

Now is not the time to explore the difference between Luke’s temporal understanding and Matthew’s seeming more emotional and spiritual understanding. It is enough to say for now that Luke has real poverty in mind. Luke’s beatitude cannot be construed in some type of voluntary act of temporal poverty or a willful or learned meekness or humility as it is often thought of in its domesticated sense. Luke has in mind a poverty that is imposed upon an individual. Being poor is an affliction not a blessed choice of agency. It seems reasonable, then, to conclude that while Luke and Matthew consider poverty in different life spheres—temporal or emotional—they both have actual poverty in mind. Just as Luke’s “poor” are under the duress of physical want, so are Matthew’s “poor in spirit” under spiritual duress and want.

It seems to me that Jesus’ pronouncement, “Blessed are the poor in spirit,” should never be read as encouragement or commandment “to be humble.” It must be read as invitation and encouragement to those who are in involuntary want of emotional and spirit resources needed to live securely and happily, and endure meaningfully. No one chooses to be “poor in spirit” anymore than they choose to live in physical poverty. Understanding “poor in spirit” as some type of happy choice requiring an exertion of willpower, it seems to me, flies in the face of not only the plain meaning of this beatitude, but of the tenor of all the beatitudes. This beatitude is a word of hope for the spiritually and emotionally destitute; for the humiliated. If the beatitude challenges anything, it is not an individual’s will to improve, it is the world’s upside-down value system. This beatitude is an example of Jesus turning the world upside down, just as his mother foresaw he would do.

“He hath put down the mighty from their seats,
and exalted them of low degree.
He hath filled the hungry with good things;
and the rich he hath sent empty away” (Lk. 1.⁵³⁻⁵⁴).

⁴ See, again, *Theological Dictionary of the New Testament*.

⁵ “The Gospel According to John,” *The New International Commentary on the New Testament*, Leon Morris, Eerdmans, Grand Rapids, MI, 1995, p. 195.

Rejoice, you who have felt spiritually weak and impotent. For Jesus has a blessing for you. Beware, you who think of yourselves as something other than spiritually impoverished.

Even so, come, Lord Jesus!

meditation 5 (vs. 4)

⁴Blessed are they that mourn: for they shall be comforted.

In this meditation we will, as we did in the previous beatitude and will for each remaining beatitude, consider this beatitude's two parts: condition and promise. In considering the condition, we will ask, again, whether we should read the condition in terms of command or invitation/ comfort and of what the nature of the condition consists.

In examining the condition of the first beatitude, "poor in spirit," we reject all attempts to domesticate the saying and turn it into a command to exercise one's will and agency "to be humble;" to turn being "poor in spirit" into an acquired virtue. Rather, we heard in the condition the Savior's invitation and comfort spoken to all who are self-aware enough to know that they are in very deed destitute of spiritual resources one expects of those who might inherit the "kingdom of heaven." If this is "humility" it is not due to "teachableness" but to the real humiliation of real spiritual impoverishment.

Objections to the spiritually weak being comforted with and promised the kingdom of heaven seem, to me, pathetic and self-righteous. What? Do those who object to this reading imagine they are not spiritually impoverished? Do they imagine themselves to be some type of spiritual millionaires, billionaires? If so, they should consider Luke's anti-beatitude associated with the first beatitude: "But woe unto you that are rich! For ye have received your consolation." Or are they possessed by the petty human fear that someone they think is less than them is getting something equal or superior to themselves? Both objections to the spiritually weak being comforted with the promise of the kingdom of heaven are not only pathetic. They exhibit the worse kind of spiritual deformity. Jesus, we think, would all it hypocritical and pharisaical.

Unfortunately, we sometimes witness the same type of spiritual deformity in the understanding of the second beatitude: "Blessed are they that mourn; for they shall be comforted." Mourning, is turned into a command and morphed into a virtue.

"Why," I was once asked, "would Jesus offer comfort to any ol' person who mourns for any ol' reason? Humans mourn for any number of reasons, not all of which deserve Jesus' comfort." This inhumane bit of callousness shocked me and brought many possible retorts to mind. But after counting to ten, I finally asked, "So, what type of mourning is it, do you imagine, that "deserves" Jesus' comfort?"

"We can expect to be comforted if we mourn sin—ours and others. Then again, we can expect to be comforted when we keep our baptismal covenants "to mourn with those that mourn; yea, and comfort those that stand in need of comfort" (Mos. 18.⁹).

You just can't make this stuff up. Such virtue signaling! Such absurdity. These are what I call the happy mourners. But such perversion does what so many self-righteous need it to do. It turns the beatitude into a virtue acquired through obedience. The blessing becomes an earned award. It is simply incomprehensible to many that a divine promise could be acquired without effort, will, and agency. And, again, this opens up the whole can of worms that perhaps someone is comforted that does deserve it as much as us. But such deformed ideas and attitudes have nothing to do with Jesus.

As Jesus teaches on the mount, he means to be clear. He is talking to every single mourner. He mourns with every single mourner—yes even those who mourn because of their own folly—and comfort those who stand in need of comfort, whether their need for comfort flows from their own folly or that of another. And if they mourn because of their own folly, their mourning is no less

deserving of divine comfort.

Jesus promised comfort to those who mourn. Period. Jesus promised comfort to those who live a life of mourning, to whom joy seldom comes. Millions have and do so live. Their time of recompense is coming. It is not the happiest people on the face of the earth but those who weep and mourn who find in Jesus such a friend. One wonders if those such as my inquisitor above will ever find comfort and joy in Jesus. For Luke has an anti-beatitude for this second beatitude just as he did with the first.

“Woe unto you that laugh now! For ye shall mourn and weep.”

Even so, come, Lord Jesus!

meditation 6 (verse 7)

Blessed are the merciful: for they shall obtain mercy.

Mercy has been and still is conceived of in various ways. It has been thought of at times as a strictly emotional response, a passion. Depending upon the times and the philosophical outlook, the Greeks thought of this emotion or passion both negatively and positively. It has sometimes been thought of primarily in terms of behavior. It has been thought of in terms of behavior in response to emotion stirred by another's misfortune. We could go on. There are many insightful ways to view mercy. Here, I would like to offer one that might provide fertile ground for thought and meditation.

I would have the reader consider the similarity between English, "mercy" and French, "merci." According to etymological studies, the two come from Old French, *merci* or *mercit*, meaning "gift, kindness, grace, or pity." It is easy to see how French, "merci," came to mean "thank you (for the gift)" and then simply "thank you." "Thanks," after all, is a response to some act beneficial to the one doing the thanking. Furthermore, "thanks" implies appreciation for a benefit and, more, acceptance of the benefit. When we say, "thank you," we are essentially saying, "I accept your proffered benefit."

Interestingly, English, "grace," often associated with mercy, and Italian/ Spanish "grazia/ gracias" sound similar, with the two non-English words developing into "thank you" just as French "merci." We often speak of "saying grace" when we offer "thanks" over a meal.

All this suggests that standing behind the words "mercy" and "grace" is the idea of "appreciative acceptance." God's "mercy" and "grace," at least in part, speaks to a divine characteristic of acceptance. God is an accepting Being. He is appreciative and accepting of others. He finds pleasure in others. His mercy/ grace is a kind of "thank you." I accept who and what you are." Scripture bears witness that God's "acceptance" goes far, far further than we imagine. It is not in his nature to be easily dismissive—to easily reject others.

"For as the heaven is high above the earth,
so great is his mercy toward them that fear him" (Ps. 103.¹¹).

In his fifth beatitude, Jesus offers happiness to those who are "merciful," or, as we have it here, who are "appreciatively accepting." One moment's thought reveals how utterly logical and mundane this statement is. We all know how unhappy we are when we reject another or their actions. Indeed, such feelings often leave us feeling as bad and unhappy as the individual who is the target of our dismissiveness or rejection. Rejection leaves a black cloud over everyone—both the one doing the rejecting and the one being rejected.

Our mercy or capacity to appreciatively accept others is unlikely to reach as far and wide as God's mercy and grace. We possess in bits and pieces what he possesses in fullness. Nevertheless, Jesus promises us more happiness and true joy in our acceptance of others than in or dismissing and rejecting of others.

Even so, come, Lord Jesus!

meditation 7 (verse 7)

Blessed are the merciful: for they shall obtain mercy.

One question we may have when we read Jesus' fifth beatitude—"Blessed are the merciful: for they shall obtain mercy"—is, "Is one who refuses to be merciful denied mercy"? I am inclined to answer this with a "yes" and "no."

We answer "yes," when we consider human relations. Individuals who are shown no mercy by another, are inclined to not show mercy to the unmerciful party. While this reaction is not inevitable, and certainly not mandatory, it is common. So, individuals who deny mercy to others are less likely to have others grant mercy to them. By the same token, individuals who extend mercy to others are likely to have others extend mercy to them. This is simply human nature,

But what about Divine nature? Is God inclined to show no mercy to those who, themselves, show no mercy to others? To this question, we answer, "Doubtful." It seems likely that God extends mercy to the unmerciful just as he extends mercy to any type of sinner. Yet, mercy extended may not be mercy accepted. And it may be in this way that the unmerciful do not experience divine mercy. The unmerciful may refuse to extend mercy out of principle, false though it be, and decline and refuse another's, including God's, mercy out of the same false principle.

I think we could illustrate this attitude using the famous Book of Mormon anti-Christ, Korihor. We are all familiar with his denial of Christ. Most often we attribute this denial to his belief that the future could not be known. However, there seems to be another reason. Korihor maintained

"that there could be no atonement made for the sins of men, but every man fared in this life according to the management of the creature; therefore every man prospered according to his genius, and that every man conquered according to his strength..." (Al. 30.¹⁷).

As far as Korihor was concerned, an atonement undermined his radical notion of individualism and accountability. Personal life management was the be all and end all of human existence. An atonement in which poor life management was somehow ameliorated and, worse, seemingly rewarded was anathema to him. In other words, mercy undermined personal accountability. Mercy robbed justice as he viewed it.

Korihor, then, rejected an atonement out of principle; rejecting the forgiveness of mismanagement and the granting of mercy. If Korihor stuck to his principles in death and during judgement, then he might be expected to reject any offer of divine mercy however consistently God might be in the offering.

We observe similar negative attitudes toward mercy in today's America, particularly on its political right with its radical individualism and false ideas of accountability.

It is impossible to know whether or how the certainties of the next life overcome principles and prejudices thoroughly adopted over the course of a mortal lifetime. But the existence of "sons of perdition" who reject God in the full light of His presence, suggests that some become so completely committed to false ideas and principles adopted in mortality that even a personality as compelling as God cannot penetrate them in eternity.

It might be, then, that those who deny justice to others out of principle reject mercy that God offers them out of the same false principle. This all suggests that we should be very careful about becoming overly dogmatic about anything during mortality lest we become implacable and immovable in the next life even in the face of God's and the universe's realities, and then miss out on such pleasing experiences as God's mercy as Jesus warns.

Even so, come, Lord Jesus!

Matthew 5.²³⁻²⁶

²³Therefore if thou bring thy gift to the altar, and there rememberest that thy brother hath ought against thee; ²⁴leave there thy gift before the altar, and go thy way; first be reconciled to thy brother, and then come and offer thy gift.

²⁵Agree with thine adversary quickly, whiles thou art in the way with him; lest at any time the adversary deliver thee to the judge, and the judge deliver thee to the officer, and thou be cast into prison. ²⁶Verily I say unto thee, Thou shalt by no means come out thence, till thou hast paid the uttermost farthing.

Meditation

Lent is a season of increased sorrow for sin, deeper, more heart-felt repentance, and a more faithful looking to God for forgiveness. When Jesus refers to our bringing a “gift to the altar,” it seems likely that he has our desire to be reconciled to God foremost in mind. During Lent we can place upon the altar what, astonishingly, is to God the most prized of gifts: our broken, wounded heart, sickened heart. And we can do so with full confidence that God will handle it with care and the utmost tenderness.

But, as Jesus makes clear in today’s reading, our relationship with God is bound up with our relationship with others. God cares very much about these relationships. So, as we seek reconciliation with God, Lent is also a time to take stock of our relationships with others and to attempt reconciliation with those with whom we are out of sorts. We cannot achieve reconciliation with God without doing all that we can to be reconciled to our “brother.” There are times when the latter takes priority over the former.

We place a high value on ordinances. Many would not dream of regularly missing out on partaking of the sacrament and thus receiving the weekly renewal promised in the ordinance. Temple attendance is often viewed as the height of spiritual attainment. Jesus might beg to differ. There can be no thought of worshipping God, engaging in ritual activities, and seeking spiritual renewal while our relationship with others is in shambles. This would become pure, or impure theater. A sham.

Isaiah makes this point passionately at the beginning of his Book. He begins with the Lord’s complaint about sham, legalistic religious practices that Israel so meticulously observed.

“Hear the word of YHWH, leaders of S^cdōm.

Incline your ear to the instruction of our God, people of ‘A^mōrâ.

‘Why do you offer your many sacrifices to me?’ asks YHWH.

‘I have had my fill of ram offerings,

and the fat of specially prepared sacrificial animals.

As for the blood of bulls and lambs and goats—

I find no value in any of it.

When you come to present yourselves to me, who has asked this of you?

It is merely the sound of trampling feet in my courts.

Do not continue to bring such meaningless tributes?

The odor of your sacrifices is abhorrent to me.

New moon, šabbāt and calling of assemblies—

I cannot stand the iniquitous assembly.

Your new moon festivals and your other sacred times—

my soul hates.

They rest upon me like a burden.

I am weary of bearing them.

When you lift your hands to me,

I shall turn my eyes away from you.
Though you may multiply prayers,
I won't be there listening.
Your hands are covered with blood!" (1.¹⁰⁻¹⁵)

This is the equivalent of Jesus' "bringing thy gift to the altar." Israel brought their sacrifices to keep peace between itself and God and to find reconciliation with God when it was out of sorts with Him. However, to be in right standing with God and to be reconciled to Him when necessary, something far different and more difficult was required.

“Wash yourselves!
Clear yourselves!
Remove your evil deeds from my sight.
Stop doing evil.
Learn to do good.
Seek after justice.
Set things right for those treated unjustly.
Take the side of the orphan.
Plead for the widow.
¹⁸Come! Let us reason together,' says Yahweh.
'Though your sins be as scarlet,
they shall be as white as snow.
Though they are as red as scarlet died fabric,
they shall be as wool'" (1.¹⁶⁻¹⁸).

The real key to cleanliness or right standing with God is not the gifts we bring to the altar but the way we treat others; the justice and compassion we exercise in the lives of others. Interesting, Isaiah suggests that it is how we treat those who might in some way be vulnerable to us that God is particularly sensitive to and observant of.

We should give more thought to those who are in some way vulnerable and the relationship that exists between them and those whom Jesus speaks of having "ought against" us. There can be little doubt that those toward whom we are unjust and merciless will have and feel "ought against" us.

That we are responsible for our own feelings and are to snuff out feeling "ought against" our "brother" is a given. When we feel "ought against" another, we put ourselves in spiritual turmoil and danger. But Jesus ups the ante. He does not counsel us concerning our own feelings toward others, but the feelings of others toward us—"if... thy brother hath ought against thee." This is not encouragement toward narcissism, but toward community and at-one-ment. Jesus reminds us of the impact we have on others and places responsibility upon us to be a healer.

Whether our "brother" admits it or not, his possessing "ought against" us, whether it is justified or not, puts him in turmoil. It disturbs his emotional equilibrium and diminishes his spiritual capacities. It places him in a spiritually vulnerable place. It doesn't matter "who's at fault" in the ruptured relationship, we have a responsibility to at least reach out and attempt to be a healer in our "brother's" life. We do not do so in such a way as to convince him of our rightness and of his wrongness. We do what we can to put him back in equilibrium and out of turmoil. We try to leave him with the renewed spiritual capacities that he will need to meet life's inevitable challenges.

We act, in other words, as we would have God act in our life as we approach the altar. We bestow reconciliation upon others as we seek reconciliation with God. Only then can we return to God's altar

with our gift in hand and plead in good conscious for the healing reconciliation with God that renews us, empowers us to meet life's challenges, and makes it possible for us to be what God intends us to be: a blessing to others.

Even so, come, Lord Jesus!

(edition: february 18, 2024)

Matthew 6.⁹⁻¹³

⁹After this manner therefore pray ye:

Our Father which art in heaven,

Hallowed be thy name.

¹⁰Thy kingdom come.

Thy will be done in earth, as it is in heaven.

¹¹Give us this day our daily bread.

¹²And forgive us our debts, as we forgive our debtors.

¹³And lead us not into temptation,

but deliver us from evil:

For thine is the kingdom, and the power, and the glory, for ever. Amen.

Meditation

There is no end of lessons to be learned from Jesus' instructional prayer, known as "The Lord's Prayer." We can, here, only examine two or three. First, we are impressed that Jesus' instructional prayer does far more than provide a "formula" or "pattern" for prayer—address Heavenly Father, thank him, ask him, and sign off with a resounding and heart felt "amen." If this prayer served as a pattern, it would be a simple matter to master the formula and move on to bigger and better things. But if we see the prayer for what it is—more a master class in effective prayer than tired and lifeless formula—then we will return to the prayer over and over again knowing that we can improve our prayer life with each sincere and searching inquiry.

As something far more than formula, we think of Jesus' start to prayer: "Our Father..." How unwise to imagine that Jesus' principal point is, "This is how you begin a prayer." Or, "These are a prayer's first words." Prayers established upon such shallow formalism are more likely to drop to the floor after leaving our lips than ascending to the ears of "Our Father which art in heaven." So what is the point of Jesus' "Our Father"? Every time we read these words and every time we use them in prayer, we explore anew what it means to have a God who is "Father." "Papa." "Daddy." We are invited to believe that God, the greatest of all, really does possess sincere and deep feelings of intimacy with us, however flawed we may be. He really does wish to hear from us; to know what we are thinking and feeling. He really does wish to commune with us. He really is a Dad who wishes to engage in meaningful and honest conversation with his children.

We are also struck by the person and number of Jesus' pronouns.

"Give *us* this day *our* daily bread."

"Forgive *us our* debts, as *we* forgive *our* debtors."

"Lead *us* not into temptation."

"Deliver *us* from evil."

"Us," not "me." "Our," not "my." "We," not "I."

Prayer is personal, of course, and private. Yes, He wants to hear about our individual lives: our appreciations, concerns, needs, and hopes. But, as Jesus' language demonstrates, prayer is not selfish and self-centered. Jesus wants our prayers to focus on others as well as ourselves: their concerns, their needs, and their hopes. He expects that we will use our prayers to pray for and in behalf of others. He wants to know that we are striving to make a better world and a more fertile environment for others to grow.

Prayer is as much about getting outside our own heads as it is about revealing our minds to God.

We also see God's interest in having our prayers get outside our heads with the second element of Jesus' prayer: "Hallowed be thy name." It is an understatement of epic proportions to say that God is a unique Being (God's holiness signifies His uniqueness and superiority), or that His character (the meaning of his "name") is unmatched. Prayer is a time to not only pray about ourselves, those around us, and the lives we live; it is also a time to talk to God about God. Tell Him what and how we think of Him. What we appreciate about Him. It is a time to ask Him questions about Himself, His hopes, His plans, His life. And then, to listen to His response.

Though Jesus does not mention it, listening is one of the most important aspects of prayer. We all do far too much of the talking during prayer and far too little listening. It is probably not too far off the mark to estimate that we spend 100% of our prayer time talking, when it probably should be more 50-50: 50% of the time we do the talk, 50% of the time we stop talking and listen. Listening, yes, for direction in our life and direction on how to be of greater service to others. But also, listening to God tell us about Himself.

Oh, how glorious it is to hear Him talk about Himself!

These are just a few of the many things we learn from the Lord's Prayer.

Yes, we can use prayer to get an answer or two to this life's complexities. But we can use prayer for the higher and more eternal things of God. During Lent, we can more consistently use prayer to help us focus on the hope of God's kingdom, both on earth and in heaven. We can more diligently take stock of our prayer life and improve our prayers by examining and reexamining Jesus' instructional prayer. We can more thoughtfully use our prayers in the service of others and to seek blessings for others. We can use our prayers to come to know God more intimately, and to let God be the Dad that He so ardently desires to be.

Even so, come, Lord Jesus!

(edition: march 9, 2024)

Matthew 6.²⁴

No man can serve two masters: for either he will hate the one, and love the other; or else he will hold to the one, and despise the other. Ye cannot serve God and mammon.

meditation

While we might name others, Jesus sees one “lord” as particularly tempting and powerful in its competition with God for the hearts and minds of humankind. This lord’s name is Mammon. This lord is wealth, money, material assets. Most believe the word, Aramaic in origin, means “that in which one trusts.” It is doubtful that in the long, long history of humankind anything has worked harder to earn our trust than Lord Mammon. It is doubtful that humanity has worked harder for any tyrant.

The Bible reports that the first being born on this earth was named, Cain. His name means “gain, acquisition.” How appropriate is that! He went so far as to murder “to get gain.” Mammon, then, is an aggressive tyrant. It will bear no competition. With its false promise that “you can have anything in this world for money,” it demands that we reject all other lords. Among the many lord’s we are to reject, is the one Lord that is truly Lord. The one Lord that actually cares about us. It is not too much to say that while it was human hands that were laid upon the Lord God, it was Mammon that killed him. Hung him on a cross because he threatened its sovereignty.

There simply can be no compromise. It is one or the other. Which one is your lord? Which one holds mastery over you; over how you spend your time—the best of it; over where you spend your thoughts—the best of them; over where you use your resources—the best of them; over where you spend your energies—the best of them? These are questions of allegiance that Jesus would have us examine, and, where necessary, repent of.

Even so, come, Lord Jesus!

Matthew 11.²⁸⁻³⁰

²⁸“Come unto me,
all ye that labour and are heavy laden,
and I will give you rest.

²⁹Take my yoke upon you,
and learn of me;
for I am meek and lowly in heart:
and ye shall find rest unto your souls.

³⁰For my yoke is easy,
and my burden is light.

meditation

We often sing of an otherwise indistinct silent night in Bethlehem that witnessed the birth of a “holy infant, so tender and mild.” We sing of “the lowly manger, a humble bed wherein was laid the wonderous little Stranger.” In song, we witness that “that child so dear and gentle is our Lord in heav’n.” Our hearts are warmed at our thoughts of the meek and mild, tender and lowly infant, Jesus. We would hold him and rock him in our arms if we could. We reverently whisper our plea, “stay with me Lord Jesus!”

But then, somehow, he grows up on us. After living meekly, according to his divine character, he suffers and dies and ascends into heaven. There, he reigns in power and glory. He is magnificent beyond words. He becomes demanding and intimidating. And we become intimidated. Soon, we are singing words such as these,

“Once all things he meekly bore
But he now will bear no more.”¹

Such words, one fears, completely miss the point. Jesus was, on earth, acting consistent with who and what he was, always had been, and ever would be. Further, in coming to earth, Jesus was revealing the nature of his father.

“He that hath seen me hath seen the Father” (Jn. 14.⁹).

He was “meek and lowly in heart” on earth because his Father was “meek and lowly in heart” in heaven. It is the nature of Divinity to meekly bear with inferior beings. It is the nature of Divinity to experience and endure pain and sorrow for and because of inferior beings. Enoch saw and was stupefied by this aspect of the divine character.

“And it came to pass that the God of heaven looked upon the residue of the people, and he wept; and Enoch bore record of it, saying: ‘How is it that the heavens weep, and shed forth their tears as the rain upon the mountains?’

“And Enoch said unto the Lord: ‘How is it that thou canst weep, seeing thou art holy, and from all eternity to all eternity? And were it possible that man could number the particles of the earth, yea, millions of earths like this, it would not be a beginning to the number of thy creations; and thy curtains are stretched out still; and yet thou art there, and thy bosom is there; and also thou art just; thou art merciful and kind forever; and thou hast taken Zion to thine own bosom, from all thy creations, from all eternity to all eternity; and naught but peace, justice, and truth is

¹ LDS Hymn #196, “Jesus, Once of Humble Birth.”

the habitation of thy throne; and mercy shall go before thy face and have no end; how is it thou canst weep?” (Moses 7.²⁸⁻³¹).

Three times. Three times, Enoch expressed his stupefaction, asking “How is it?” How is it that God can weep. Enoch is more to be forgiven for his confusion than we. Unlike him, we have the advantage of Holy Scripture. We have the advantage of having the Gospels and their record of Jesus’ manner of life. How is it that we so easily forget; forget what Jesus himself spoke, what Jesus himself tried to tell us before he left us to sit on the right hand of God. He was, then and always, “meek and lowly in heart.” He would bear our burdens with us, always and forever, here and eternity. He would remain, always approachable and personable. That would never change.

On our own silent nights when burdens of fear and worry, sin and guilt disturb our peace, he will, he promised, be there for us, if we asked. He would hold us as we might think of holding him during the Christmas season. He will “encircle” us “eternally in the arms of his love” (2 Ne. 1.¹⁵).

Even so, come, Lord Jesus!

Matthew 21.¹⁻¹¹

¹And when they drew nigh unto Jerusalem, and were come to Bethphage, unto the mount of Olives, then sent Jesus two disciples, ²Saying unto them, “Go into the village over against you, and straightway ye shall find an ass tied, and a colt with her: loose them, and bring them unto me. ³And if any man say ought unto you, ye shall say, ‘The Lord hath need of them;’ and straightway he will send them.”

⁴All this was done, that it might be fulfilled which was spoken by the prophet, saying,

⁵“Tell ye the daughter of Sion,
Behold, thy King cometh unto thee,
meek, and sitting upon an ass,
and a colt the foal of an ass.”

⁶And the disciples went, and did as Jesus commanded them, ⁷And brought the ass, and the colt, and put on them their clothes, and they set him thereon. ⁸And a very great multitude spread their garments in the way; others cut down branches from the trees, and strawed them in the way. ⁹And the multitudes that went before, and that followed, cried, saying,

“Hosanna to the Son of David:
Blessed is he that cometh in the name of the Lord;
Hosanna in the highest.”

¹⁰And when he was come into Jerusalem, all the city was moved, saying, “Who is this?”

¹¹And the multitude said, “This is Jesus the prophet of Nazareth of Galilee.”

meditation

Jesus was under necessity of constantly correcting the world’s twisted view of what greatness and power looked like—a view to which his own disciples seem to have held and to which they expected Jesus to conform. Over and over again, Jesus found it necessary to repeat by word and action that rather than being accepted and raised to a position of power, he would be rejected and killed. Scandalously, he maintained that his death would, in fact, be a sign and evidence, not of his failure and weakness, but of his greatness and power.

Such assertions always left his disciples feeling embarrassed and confused. Who can blame them? Whoever heard of the sort of greatness and power that Jesus advocated and practiced in his own life? Jesus would keep at it right through his final breaths. Leading up to his scandalous death on the cross, he used his “Triumphal Entry” on Palm Sunday as another sermon on the nature of true greatness and power.

It seems almost certain that Jesus intended his Triumphal Entry into Jerusalem to stand in clear contrast to the common Roman triumphs that celebrated the accomplishments and grandeur of Emperors and Generals. Now, the Romans knew how to throw a triumph. Emperors and generals entered the city in huge processions and with great pomp and fanfare, evidence of their popularity. Mounted on muscular and prancing stallions and driving defeated and subject peoples before them, they sought to project power and control and intimidating dominance. Using public funds, no expense was spared to conduct lavish processions, games, and feasting. These could go on for many days. These, too, spoke of the honoree’s powerful and commanding societal dominance.

Yes, Rome’s leaders appreciated the power of propaganda that a triumphal entry provided. They knew how to preach their own version of sermons about the nature of power and greatness. So, the sermon Jesus preached on the day of his Triumphal Entry through his very intentional selection of a donkey as his

means of conveyance into Jerusalem could not be more at odds with Roman traditions of triumphs and the propaganda they disseminated about greatness and power.

Jesus intended to be a king and leader like no other. He had no interest in seeming dominant and intimidating. He intended, rather to be openly approachable and assessable. Jesus would be a “meek” king. This word, related to “friend,” means to be “gentle,” “soothing,” “allaying,” “calming.” Earlier in his ministry, Jesus had used this same word of himself when trying to explain the nature and character of his greatness and power.

“Come unto me, all ye that labour and are heavy laden,
and I will give you rest.
Take my yoke upon you, and learn of me;
For *I am meek* and lowly in heart:
And ye shall find rest unto your souls” (Mt. 11.²⁸⁻²⁹).

Palm Sunday affords us the opportunity to reexamine our view of true greatness and power. We can use Jesus’ example on this day to strive a little harder to harmonize our strivings for “greatness,” and our use of “power” with Jesus’ values. Jesus’ example on Palm Sunday should lead us to observe those deemed to be leaders—sacred or secular—and consider how they use power and express power. Those who follow Jesus’ example of meekness are worthy of our trust and support. Those who do not are not worthy of our trust and support. Finally, Jesus’ example on Palm Sunday reminds us that when we pray we should do so as if approaching a Being who is by his very nature, meek, friendly, soothing, and approachable.

Even so, come, Lord Jesus!

(edition: march 23, 2024)

Matthew 21.¹²⁻¹⁶

¹²And Jesus went into the temple of God, and cast out all them that sold and bought in the temple, and overthrew the tables of the moneychangers, and the seats of them that sold doves, ¹³and said unto them, "It is written, 'My house shall be called the house of prayer;' but ye have made it a den of thieves."

¹⁴And the blind and the lame came to him in the temple; and he healed them. ¹⁵And when the chief priests and scribes saw the wonderful things that he did, and the children crying in the temple, and saying, "Hosanna to the Son of David;" they were sore displeased, ¹⁶And said unto him, "Hearest thou what these say?"

And Jesus saith unto them, "Yea; have ye never read, 'Out of the mouth of babes and sucklings thou hast perfected praise?'"

meditation

I remember learning about the infamous "Hole in the Wall" located in northern Wyoming. For half a century, American outlaws used it to escape arrest and punishment for their criminal behavior—Kid Curry, Black Jack Ketchum, the Logan brothers, Butch Cassidy, and Sundance Kid among them. So, I was intrigued by Jesus' charge that Jewish leaders had turned the temple of his day into a "den of thieves," a place the "religious" went to hide their criminal behavior and hide from the consequences. The intrigue grew with the realization that Jeremiah had delivered the exact same charge some 600 years earlier.

"Is this house, which is called by my name, become a den of robbers in your eyes?" (Jer. 7.¹¹)

Immediately before this condemning question, Jeremiah issued this stark warning:

"Trust ye not in lying words, saying, 'The temple of the LORD, The temple of the LORD, The temple of the LORD, *are* these.'

"For if ye thoroughly amend your ways and your doings; if ye throughly execute judgment between a man and his neighbour; *if* ye oppress not the stranger, the fatherless, and the widow, and shed not innocent blood in this place, neither walk after other gods to your hurt: then will I cause you to dwell in this place, in the land that I gave to your fathers, for ever and ever.

"Behold, ye trust in lying words, that cannot profit. Will ye steal, murder, and commit adultery, and swear falsely, and burn incense unto Baal, and walk after other gods whom ye know not; and come and stand before me in this house, which is called by my name, and say, "We are delivered to do all these abominations?" (Jer. 7.⁵⁻¹⁰)

Jeremiah witnessed unjust and cruel treatment of people outside the temple and saw it as inconsistent and contradictory to the supposed holiness of the Lord's house. Indeed injustice and cruelty toward others defiled the temple.

Like Jeremiah, all the Hebrew prophets were often ambivalent to skeptical about the temple. It seemed to them that ordinances, scrupulously conducted inside the temple, often overshadowed and even replaced moral and godly behavior outside the temple.

Criticism such as Jesus' and Jeremiah's is not restricted to Jewish temples. It would seem that such sham religion is not uncommon. Religious peoples of all sorts and sects run afoul of the law and use their temples, synagogues, sanctuaries, churches, chapels, and meeting houses as places of ill repute. In fact, it

might be as common as not. Claiming insight into our day and our religious culture, Mormon, who lived on the other side of the world a millennium after Jeremiah and nearly half a millennium after Jesus, complained,

“Behold, I speak unto you as if ye were present, and yet ye are not. But behold, Jesus Christ hath shown you unto me, and I know your doing. And I know that ye do walk in the pride of your hearts; and there are none save a few only who do not lift themselves up in the pride of their hearts, unto the wearing of very fine apparel, unto envying, and strifes, and malice, and persecutions, and all manner of iniquities; and your churches, yea, even every one, have become polluted because of the pride of your hearts. For behold, ye do love money, and your substance, and your fine apparel, and the adorning of your churches, more than ye love the poor and the needy, the sick and the afflicted. O ye pollutions, ye hypocrites, ye teachers, who sell yourselves for that which will canker, why have ye polluted the holy church of God? (Morm. 8.³⁵⁻³⁸).

We should note the common element to the criticism: money. The priesthood used the temple to make money—and money, according to false religions of all times and places, is a window into one’s “righteousness,” with the righteous being wealthier than the “wicked.

Today, we often adorn our places of worship with ill-gotten and vainly spent cash as a vain attempt to hide a multitude of sins outside our places of worship. The temple is, then, in Jesus’ view indicative of an immoral society that attempts to hide its immorality through vain religious show. It is also indicative of a society whose immorality so often takes the form of insatiable economic lusts that lead to injustice. As usual, the insatiable economic lusts cause a devaluing of others, putting economic gain over individual needs and personal dignity.

This is seen in today’s reading by the apparent contempt that religious leaders show toward the “blind and the lame” and their enthusiasm for Jesus and his good news: “Tell these people to shut up!” But, it is in these very people, whom they wish to silence—the “blind,” the “lame,” and all other vulnerable populations—that a “pure religion” would be most interested and concerned to serve, rather than the financial interests of a religious/ political elite.

Jesus’ cleansing of the temple reminds us of the need to forsake our self-made Holes in the Wall, confess our sins committed outside the temple rather than boast of our “righteousness” inside the temple, and alter our attitudes and behaviors toward the vulnerable. The Lent and Easter Season is a good time to allow Jesus entrance into our temple and cleanse us of all sham religion that puts legalistic concerns and actions above the needs of others, especially the vulnerable.

Even so, come, Lord Jesus!

(edition: march 23, 2024)

Matthew 22.³⁴⁻⁴⁰

³⁴But when the Pharisees had heard that he had put the Sadducees to silence, they were gathered together. ³⁵Then one of them, which was a lawyer, asked him a question, tempting him, and saying,

³⁶“Master, which is the great commandment in the law?”

³⁷Jesus said unto him, “‘Thou shalt love the Lord thy God with all thy heart, and with all thy soul, and with all thy mind.’ ³⁸This is the first and great commandment.

³⁹And the second is like unto it, ‘Thou shalt love thy neighbour as thyself.’ ⁴⁰On these two commandments hang all the law and the prophets.”

Meditation

Jesus’ conclusion seems so logical. So straightforward. So right. Why, then, is it so difficult to live? And why do we so often mutate “commandments” into some rote and lifeless legalism devoid of and divorced from love?

The answer is as simply as Jesus’ conclusion: It is easier. It is easier to do stuff than to relate with others. And because it is easier, it is doable. And because it is so easily doable, it makes us feel oh so righteous. And this, for the religious minded, is everything—feeling right with God.

Israel had inherited innumerable commandments and ordinances in relation to the proper function of its temple. The record seems pretty clear that for the most part the nation was—at least mechanically, in a technocratic sort of way—meticulous, scrupulous about observing these directions. People died fighting to maintain the temple’s proper functioning. It would seem, then, that the nation was dominated by the love of God. It certainly wanted you to think so. And yet, the Hebrew prophets are almost universal in their assessment. Because the apparent “love of God” that took place inside the temple did not match the “love,” either of God or the neighbor, that took place outside the temple, the temple with its meticulous observation was a sham. Jesus, as we have seen agreed. After a series of generalized accusations concerning Israel’s sin, this is Isaiah’s first specific, in-depth look at the nature of the nation’s sin.

“Hear the word of the LORD, ye rulers of Sodom;
give ear unto the law of our God, ye people of Gomorrah.
To what purpose is the multitude of your sacrifices unto me?
saith the LORD:
I am full of the burnt offerings of rams,
and the fat of fed beasts;
and I delight not
in the blood of bullocks, or of lambs, or of he goats.
When ye come to appear before me,
who hath required this at your hand, to tread my courts?
Bring no more vain oblations;
incense is an abomination unto me;
the new moons and sabbaths, the calling of assemblies,
I cannot away with; it is iniquity, even the solemn meeting.
Your new moons and your appointed feasts
my soul hateth:
they are a trouble unto me;
I am weary to bear them.
And when ye spread forth your hands,
I will hide mine eyes from you:
yea, when ye make many prayers,
I will not hear:

your hands are full of blood” (Is. 1.¹⁰⁻¹⁵).

What made the meticulous temple worship so abominable? The lack of love and its companion, justice.

“Wash you,
make you clean;
put away the evil of your doings from before mine eyes;
cease to do evil;
Learn to do well;
seek judgment,
relieve the oppressed,
judge the fatherless,
plead for the widow.
Come now, and let us reason together,
saith the LORD:
though your sins be as scarlet,
they shall be as white as snow;
though they be red like crimson,
they shall be as wool” (Is 1.¹⁶⁻¹⁸).

One can kill a million sheep if one wants. But all that bloody death will have less cleansing impact than the assistance one lends to just one vulnerable person. Jesus’ precious blood is no more efficacious or cleansing in a life lived in injustice to the vulnerable. We will stick with Isaiah for another example. Fasting is a good idea. It’s a “commandment,” right? Good for both body and soul. A commendable indication of self-control. Surely its observance is indicative of the love of God. It can’t be deformed into something dead, can it? Israel was under this false impression.

“Cry aloud, spare not,
lift up thy voice like a trumpet,
and shew my people their transgression,
and the house of Jacob their sins.
Yet they seek me daily,
and delight to know my ways,
as a nation that did righteousness,
and forsook not the ordinance of their God:
they ask of me the ordinances of justice;
they take delight in approaching to God” (Is. 58.¹⁻²)

But God knew. He knew that any commandment—even one whose objective was a display of one’s love of God—any commandment, no matter how scrupulously observed, was an abomination if it became divorced from love and care of others.

“Is it such a fast that I have chosen?
a day for a man to afflict his soul?
is it to bow down his head as a bulrush,
and to spread sackcloth and ashes under him?
wilt thou call this a fast,
and an acceptable day to the LORD?
Is not this the fast that I have chosen?
to loose the bands of wickedness,

to undo the heavy burdens,
and to let the oppressed go free,
and that ye break every yoke?
Is it not to deal thy bread to the hungry,
and that thou bring the poor that are cast out to thy house?
when thou seest the naked, that thou cover him;
and that thou hide not thyself from thine own flesh?" (Is. 58.⁵⁻⁷)

It can be difficult to love some people. People can be so annoying. It is even harder to love everyone all of the time. It is harder yet to consistently act upon the principle of love. But, one need not worry about relationships in rote legalism. Don't worry how or why. Just do it.

Jesus, of course, knew all of this. He had experienced it. He knew how hard his standard could be. It ended up sending him to the top of a cross. But this attachment, real attachment to real people and real attachment to an active God, is the only way to survive, not only here on good ol planet earth, but out there in the cosmos with its unknown challenges and delights.

The Lent and Easter Season is a good time to take stock of the whys and what fors of our daily observance of God's commandments. It is a good time to study and pray and ponder and plead that our hearts might be softened so that we do God's will out of love unfeigned. Then, it will not matter so much what good we do in their lives, or where we do it, or how often we do it. It will simply be good old fashion charity—the pure love of Christ.

Even so, come, Lord Jesus!

(edition: march 23, 2024)

Matthew 24.^{42, 44, 46}

⁴²Watch therefore: for ye know not what hour your Lord doth come.

⁴⁴Therefore be ye also ready: for in such an hour as ye think not the Son of man cometh.

⁴⁶Blessed is that servant, whom his lord when he cometh shall find so doing.

meditation

At one point in William Douglas' novel, *The Robe*, sometime after Jesus' death and resurrection, one of Jesus' disciples, Justus, travels with a Roman citizen ignorant of the claim of Jesus' resurrection. As they travel through Galilee, "Justus turned about; and, shielding his eyes with his cupped hands, gazed intently down the road over which they had come.... It was not the first time that Justus had stopped to look backwards. And whenever they had come to a crossing, he had paused to look carefully in all directions. He did not seem to be apprehensive of danger. It was rather as if he had made an appointment to meet someone up here."

Though fictional, this narrative captures, I think, the loss that the disciples felt with Jesus' departure, and their desires and expectations for his return. It speaks to their love for and dependence upon him. It also captures the sort of watchfulness in which we should live. It captures the sort of love we should have for him. It captures the anticipation of his presence that should animate our lives. It captures the sort of need for him that we ought to possess and confess every chance we get. Such watchfulness and love and anticipation and confession is pleasing to him and necessary for our spiritual health.

The Advent and Christmas season is not only a time to look back to Jesus' first coming, but forward to a second coming. Whether one understands this second coming in the traditional sense or not, one can certainly understand "the" second coming as that in which he enters intimately into each of our lives as he entered so intimately into so many lives during his mortal ministry.

Even so, come, Lord Jesus!

Matthew 26.³⁶⁻⁴⁶

³⁶Then cometh Jesus with them unto a place called Gethsemane, and saith unto the disciples, “Sit ye here, while I go and pray yonder.”

³⁷And he took with him Peter and the two sons of Zebedee, and began to be sorrowful and very heavy. ³⁸Then saith he unto them, “My soul is exceeding sorrowful, even unto death: tarry ye here, and watch with me.”

³⁹And he went a little further, and fell on his face, and prayed, saying, “O my Father, if it be possible, let this cup pass from me: nevertheless not as I will, but as thou wilt.”

⁴⁰And he cometh unto the disciples, and findeth them asleep, and saith unto Peter, “What, could ye not watch with me one hour? ⁴¹Watch and pray, that ye enter not into temptation: the spirit indeed is willing, but the flesh is weak.”

⁴²He went away again the second time, and prayed, saying, “O my Father, if this cup may not pass away from me, except I drink it, thy will be done.”

⁴³And he came and found them asleep again: for their eyes were heavy. ⁴⁴And he left them, and went away again, and prayed the third time, saying the same words. ⁴⁵Then cometh he to his disciples, and saith unto them, “Sleep on now, and take your rest: behold, the hour is at hand, and the Son of man is betrayed into the hands of sinners. ⁴⁶Rise, let us be going: behold, he is at hand that doth betray me.”

meditation

Scripture struggles to adequately describe and explain Jesus’ atonement, what it means, how it impacts us, and how it impacted him. This is understandable. Human language is not up to the task of talking about Beings who are infinite or the infinite works they perform. Our resort to metaphor is the best we can do. However ingenious the metaphor, we must always remember that it is only and just that— metaphor— and thus merely approximate, and always inadequate to the reality of the divine.

I have always been intrigued at Jesus’ resort to metaphor in regard to his suffering and pain even as he discusses it with his Father, an infinite Being capable of understanding infinite things: “O my Father, if it be possible, let this cup pass from me.” Perhaps he resorted to metaphor more for our benefit than for any benefit it might bring to his communication with his Father. We know what he meant, of course, by “let this cup pass from me.” “Let this pain pass.” “Stop the pain.” “Isn’t there some other way?” Some such sentiment. But, perhaps you have wondered, as I have, why he resorted to the image of a cup to represent his pain? Scripture uses this metaphor of a cup to represent a pain and suffering that is hellish, literally. There is a cup that is a metaphor for the pain and destructiveness of hell. King Benjamin so uses it in his famous sermon at the temple.

“And if they be evil they are consigned to an awful view of their own guilt and abominations, which doth cause them to shrink from the presence of the Lord into a state of misery and endless torment, from whence they can no more return; therefore they have drunk damnation to their own souls. Therefore, they have drunk out of the cup of the wrath of God...” (Mos. 3.²⁵⁻²⁶).

Here, I understand Benjamin to refer to a deeply painful mental or psychological state, either in life or in death. Those so suffering feel extraordinarily guilty and believe that God is angry with them—a belief that, while intensely painful and “real” to sufferer, is likely false. But, whether God is actually angry or not, the thought of his anger is real enough to be called “hellish.”

In his Atonement, Jesus became at-one with us. He experienced everything all the rest of us have, do, or will feel. This includes the sense of God’s “anger” or “alienation” with us. Jesus so thoroughly united

with us, that he felt the guilt of sin. Paul goes a further and says that Jesus was “made... to be sin for us” (2 Cor. 5.²¹).

Here are a few more passages that speak of a cup. These bear some semblance, I contend, with the cup of which Jesus spoke.

“Awake, awake, stand up, O Jerusalem,
which hast drunk at the hand of the Lord the *cup of his fury*;
thou hast drunken the dregs of the *cup of trembling*,
and wrung them out” (Is. 51.¹⁷).

“But behold, an awful death cometh upon the wicked; for they die as to things pertaining to things of righteousness; for they are unclean, and no unclean thing can inherit the kingdom of God; but they are cast out, and consigned to partake of the fruits of their labors or their works, which have been evil; and they drink *the dregs of a bitter cup*” (Al. 40.²⁶).

“For thus saith the Lord God of Israel unto me; take the wine *cup of this fury* at my hand, and cause all the nations, to whom I send thee, to drink it. And they shall drink, and *be moved, and be mad...* Drink ye, and *be drunken, and spue, and fall, and rise no more*” (Jer. 25.^{15-16, 27}).

The emotional, psychological and spiritual turmoil of the hellish cup is a most hateful brew. It is brutal and brutish. It brings fear and trembling and sickness. It is enough to drive one mad—and indeed, during his earthly ministry, Jesus had seen and healed many so maddened by their guilt and sense of alienation from God. In becoming one with his brethren, Jesus partook of the brew and entered the madness of the cup.

“The same shall drink of the wine of the wrath of God, which is *poured out without mixture into the cup of his indignation*; and he shall be *tormented* with fire and brimstone in the presence of the holy angels, and in the presence of the Lamb: and the smoke of their torment ascendeth up for ever and ever: and they have no rest day nor night...” (Rev. 14.¹⁰⁻¹¹).

To drink the cup is like being burned alive. Yet Jesus rejected any drug that might have lessened the pain and put out the fire. He had to know the human condition to its deepest depths. He had to descend below all things so that he might know how to succor his people. Otherwise, his Atonement would not be “infinite.”

Well, we could go on. There are many other references to the horrific cup that Jesus so willingly drank. The reader might want to take some time to examine this hateful cup and its poisonous brew.¹ Such an examination is not conducted out of morbid curiosity, but out of a desire to deepen our appreciation for Jesus and the great sacrifice it was for him to come to earth and live the life that we all live—live to know the depths of the most hellish of lives. Yes, the Lent and Easter season is a good a time to “view his death” and to know and experience more deeply the new life that his death brings.

Even so, come, Lord Jesus!

(*edition: march 27, 2024*)

¹ See, for example, Mosiah 3.²⁵⁻²⁷, Psalm 11.⁶, Psalm 75.⁸, Isaiah 51.^{17&22}, Jeremiah 25.^{15-17, 27}, Jeremiah 51.⁷⁻⁹, Ezekiel 23.³²⁻³⁴, Revelation 14.¹⁰⁻¹¹, Revelation 16.¹⁹, Revelation 17.⁴⁻⁶, Alma 40.²⁶, D&C 29.¹⁷, DC 43.²⁶, DC 101.¹¹.