

THE BEATITUDES AND 'POVERTY OF SPIRIT' IN THE IGNATIAN EXERCISES

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A RETREATANT ENTERING THE SECOND WEEK of Ignatius' Spiritual Exercises encounters a challenging set of petitions in the colloquies characteristic of that week. Beginning with the Kingdom of Christ meditation, he or she is urged to protest that 'I want and desire, and it is my deliberate determination ... to imitate [Jesus] in bearing all injuries and all abuse and all poverty of spirit', so long as the Divine Majesty is pleased 'to choose and receive me to such life and state' (Exx 98). In the meditation on the Two Standards, the retreatant prays to Our Lady, in the first of three colloquies,

... that she may get me grace from Her Son and Lord that I may be received under His standard; and first in the highest spiritual poverty, and—if His Divine Majesty would be served and would want to choose and receive me—not less in actual poverty; second, in suffering contumely and injuries, to imitate Him more in them (Exx 147).

The same triple colloquy is to be repeated in the meditation on the Three Classes (see Exx 156). The prayers for the grace of desiring contempt rather than honour come to a climax in the third of the Degrees of Humility (Exx 168) that are to be considered immediately before the Election concerning States of Life.

For the moment I should like to set aside the desire for contempt and insult rather than honour, and concentrate simply upon poverty. I have long been fascinated by the parallel between the Ignatian duality of 'poverty of spirit' and 'actual poverty' and a similar duality appearing in the first of the beatitudes recorded in Matthew's (5:3–11) and Luke's

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(6:20–23) Gospels. Where Matthew has Jesus begin ‘Blessed are the poor in spirit’ (5:3a), the Lucan formulation is more simple and blunt: ‘Blessed are you who are poor’ (6:20b). If the Lucan reference is, as I would argue, to the economically poor, then the Ignatian petition that moves from ‘the highest spiritual poverty’ to ‘actual poverty’ (Exx 147) seems to correspond to what one finds when moving from Matthew to Luke. The formulation in the *Spiritual Exercises* suggests that Ignatius considered ‘actual’ poverty (that is, economic poverty) a more radical commitment than poverty of spirit—or at least that the latter, as an interior disposition, might find its highest expression in the embrace of actual poverty.¹

But what did Ignatius mean by ‘poverty of spirit?’ And how does the Ignatian phrase relate to the first beatitude in Matthew? Can some light be shed on the challenging petition that Ignatius is placing before the retreatant, in its movement from poverty of spirit to actual poverty, by considering the formulations regarding the poor in the gospel beatitudes? My thesis is that, whereas the four beatitudes in Luke simply refer to people in four situations of disadvantage over which they have no control, the Matthean formulations introduce an aspect of choice regarding such situations. In this way they provide something of a scriptural precedent for the ‘desire’ that Ignatius places before the retreatant in the meditations of the Second Week. They locate that desire firmly within the saving mission of Christ, continued in the life of believers, to break the grip of dehumanising forces in the world and reclaim human beings for the rule of God.

The Ignatian Petition

As we have seen, the formula ‘to be received ... in the highest spiritual poverty, and—if His Divine Majesty would be served and would want to choose and receive me—not less in actual poverty’ (Exx 147), suggests that Ignatius saw actual poverty as the higher state of life for the

¹ The intensification seems to flow from the placement in Exx 147 (cf. also Exx 98 and Exx 168) of the conditional clause (‘if His Divine Majesty would be served ...’) before the reference to actual poverty—in Spanish: ‘y primero en suma pobreza espiritual, y si su Divina Maiestad fuere servido y me quisiere elegir y recibir, no menos en la pobreza actual’ (italics mine). David L. Fleming provides a contemporary reading of this as ‘following him in the highest spiritual poverty, and should God be pleased thereby and want to choose and accept me, *even* [italics mine] in actual poverty’ (*Draw Me into Your Friendship: A Literal Translation and a Contemporary Reading of the Spiritual Exercises* [St Louis: Institute of Jesuit Sources, 1996], 89).



Jesus Preaching, by Rembrandt

Christian—the situation envisaged in the Lucan beatitude. The proviso, that Ignatius never fails to insert, shows that for him voluntary poverty was something that presupposed divine choice and calling. With the Election particularly in view, Ignatius explores the disposition that could make someone ready to embrace actual poverty, encouraging the retreatant towards it in order to make him or her more free to hear and respond to the divine call, should such a call be issued.

The Jesuit patristic scholar Brian E. Daley has devoted a substantial study to the background of this area of the Spiritual Exercises, specifically the Three Degrees of Humility.² Daley traces the Christian notion of humility through the tradition: from its biblical roots, through the patristic and medieval period up to the time of Ignatius. In some tension with the ideal of 'magnanimity' (an honest and realistic appreciation of one's qualities and strengths) stemming from the Greek philosophical tradition, this specifically Christian notion consists in

² Brian E. Daley, "'To Be More like Christ': The Background and Implications of 'Three Kinds of Humility'", *Studies in Jesuit Spirituality*, 27/1 (January 1995), 1–39.

recognising one's creaturely dependence upon God and imitating Christ's self-emptying embrace of the human condition to the extreme of the cross. Coming to the Third Degree of Humility, Daley writes:

The tendency of the Second Week ... to see humility as the central characteristic of the saving history of the Incarnation here reaches a kind of climax in the direct appeal to let a desire for this same humility—expressed, as always, primarily in terms of poverty and lack of honour or social status—be the guiding affective element in the retreatant's decision on how to shape his or her own saving history, how to realise his or her own 'incarnation' as Jesus' disciple and companion.³

Daley also notes that the kind of humility presented here 'is more a question of desires, of preferences, and even prejudices than it is of behaviour'.⁴ However,

... in cases where poverty and lack of personal honour seem not to limit the effectiveness of my efforts to make God better known and loved ... I will prefer them for myself, simply as a way of being more closely and concretely conformed to the model of Jesus.⁵

In this way choosing humility was, for Ignatius, clearly a way of speaking about love: a desire for the most intimate union with Christ and a personal sharing in his love that 'surpasses knowledge' (Ephesians 3:19).⁶ It also represents a desire to enter into and allow one's life to be absorbed by the divine economy of salvation, in which Christ set aside his divine glory and embraced the depths of the human condition, becoming obedient unto death, for the salvation of the world.⁷

There are difficulties that can be urged against this Ignatian aspiration towards poverty, insult, injury—against the whole complex indicated as the Third Degree of Humility—on the psychological, theological and even ethical levels.⁸ But I do not propose to enter into

³ Daley, "To Be More like Christ", 28.

⁴ Daley, "To Be More like Christ", 28–29.

⁵ Daley, "To Be More like Christ", 30.

⁶ Daley, "To Be More like Christ", 33; cf. also Michael Ivens, *Understanding the Spiritual Exercises: Text and Commentary* (Leominster: Gracewing, 1998), 126.

⁷ Cf. Daley, "To Be More like Christ", 33. Daley acknowledges here his debt to the great theologian of the Exercises Erich Przywara.

⁸ In 'On Poverty with Christ Poor' (below, 47–66), Philip Endean frankly confronts what he sees as serious psychological and ethical problems raised by this feature of the Second Week, where the

these questions here. What I should like to do is to turn to the biblical material and attempt to situate this Ignatian aspiration in relation to the beatitudes and to the Matthean Sermon on the Mount.

The Beatitudes

The literary form recognised as 'beatitude' (Greek *makarismos*) occurs in both classical and biblical (Old Testament) literature as a declaration pronouncing someone 'happy' on the basis of some good fortune. This good fortune can be simply success in an everyday or worldly sense (deliverance from danger, military victory, abundance of food or wealth, large posterity, etc.). But in the biblical literature, especially in the Psalms and Wisdom books, it is most frequently a moral quality (Psalm 1) or a particular blessing from God (Psalm 32). In this sense the declaration begins to move towards commendation of a particular way of life, and so becomes something of an exhortation.⁹

Towards the close of the Old Testament period there was an increasing tendency to cast religious thought in apocalyptic mode, with a distinctive eschatology involving a sharp distinction between the present unhappy situation of the faithful and the blessings of the age to come. This brought a new type of beatitude into play. Now those pronounced blessed are people presently in distress. Their blessedness consists solely in hope for the future.¹⁰ Where the earlier form of the beatitude tended towards exhortation, now the accent is rather upon consolation, reassurance and encouragement for those presently suffering. As Jan Lambrecht puts it,

... a future salvific state is indicated, but the possession of this hope can cause happiness now in the midst of misfortune. Certainly, the suffering does not disappear, but it is illuminated and transformed

retreatant is urged to pray for and desire poverty, insult and injury—issues that he believes have been largely ignored or inadequately dealt with in recent study of the *Exercises*. I am grateful to Fr Endean for making available the text of his paper in advance of publication—and also to his reminder concerning the work of Brian Daley.

⁹ Cf. Robert A. Guelich, *The Sermon on the Mount: A Foundation for Understanding* (Waco: Word Books, 1982), 63–66. The section of this book devoted to the beatitudes (62–118) offers one of the most comprehensive and lucid discussions of the topic in English. See also Dennis Hamm, *The Beatitudes in Context: What Luke and Matthew Meant* (Wilmington, De: Glazier, 1990), 7–12.

¹⁰ See Daniel 12:12, 'Happy are those who persevere and attain the thousand three hundred thirty-five days'; and Isaiah 30:18, 'For the LORD is a God of justice; blessed are all those who wait for him'.

because one knows the outcome. Consequently, one is rightly exhorted to rejoice now with a visible, religious, eschatological joy.¹¹

It is important to keep this distinction between two forms of beatitude—the wisdom type, orientated towards the present, and the apocalyptic type, pronouncing a blessing on the present in view of the future—clearly in mind as we consider the gospel beatitudes. At first sight it is easy to see the Matthean list as conforming to the wisdom form, in which exhortation is primary, and the Lucan one conforming to the apocalyptic form, with its stress on encouragement. But closer investigation reveals the matter to be somewhat more complex.¹²

The Lucan Beatitudes

In Luke's Gospel those called 'blessed' are not in situations in which they have any choice. In a stark second-person address, Jesus declares:

Blessed are you who are poor, for yours is the kingdom of God. Blessed are you who are hungry now, for you will be filled. Blessed are you who weep now, for you will laugh. Blessed are you when people hate you, and when they exclude you, revile you, and defame you on account of the Son of Man. Rejoice in that day and leap for joy, for surely your reward is great in heaven. (Luke 6: 20–23)

Here we clearly have to do with the apocalyptic beatitude in its pure form. Those in highly disadvantaged situations are deemed blessed, even 'now' in their misery, because of the certainty, in God's faithfulness, that the situation will be reversed.

To declare blessed those who are destitute, hungry, weeping and persecuted is highly provocative. From the world's perspective it makes no sense at all. Jesus is not endorsing these predicaments as something desirable: in themselves they are material evils that all right-minded

¹¹ Jan Lambrecht, *The Sermon on the Mount: Proclamation and Exhortation* (Wilmington, De: Glazier, 1985), 54; cf. also Guelich, *Sermon on the Mount*, 64–65.

¹² While the third person address of the Matthean beatitudes, by contrast with the more direct, second-person address of the Lucan ones, adheres more closely to the traditional biblical form, it is generally agreed that the first three, at least, of the Lucan set (blessing the poor, the hungry and the presently weeping) reflect the context of Jesus' ministry; cf. John Meier, *A Marginal Jew: Rethinking the Historical Jesus*, volume 2, *Mentor, Message, and Miracles* (New York: Doubleday, 1994), 334–336. It is not inconceivable that Jesus expressed a warning of persecution to come (Matthew 5:10 and Luke 6:22), but the origin of this beatitude is normally seen as lying in the experience of the early Church.

people should strive to eradicate or at least to combat. To call people in these situations 'blessed' only makes sense if the God who has been portrayed, from the beginning of biblical revelation, as taking the side of the poor and the disadvantaged will do so again.¹³ We find here a sense of reversal that rings through much of Luke's Gospel: in Mary's *Magnificat* (1:46–55, especially vv.51–53); in the parable of the Rich Man and Lazarus (16:19–31); and in the advice to take the lowest place at banquets (14:7–14).¹⁴

In its Lucan form, there is nothing to suggest that the first beatitude, 'Blessed are you who are poor', does anything other than declaring blessed those who are economically poor. There is no need to 'spiritualise' this beatitude, any more than there is a need to spiritualise the other three—or, *a fortiori*, the corresponding 'Woes'.¹⁵ Those Luke has in mind—in direct line with the tradition stemming from Jesus—are the



The Sermon on the Mount, from a fifteenth-century German missal

¹³ See Exodus 22: 21–23; Deuteronomy 10: 17–19; Jeremiah 7: 5–7; Amos 2: 6–7; Psalm 146: 9; etc.

¹⁴ Cf. Brendan Byrne, *The Hospitality of God: A Reading of Luke's Gospel* (Collegeville, Mn: Liturgical, 2000), 26, 123, 134, 136–137.

¹⁵ Cf. Jacques Dupont, *Les béatitudes*, volume 3, *Les évangélistes* (Paris: J. Gabalda, 1973), 43, 47, 205–206; Lambrecht, *Sermon on the Mount*, 71; Joseph A. Fitzmyer, *The Gospel According to Luke I–IX* (New York: Doubleday, 1981), 631.

actual poor. The Greek word *ptôchos* is a strong term meaning people who are destitute and have to rely totally on the support of others to survive.¹⁶ These others may include God, but this does not necessarily import a religious tone into the concept of the 'poor' itself.¹⁷ Luke's concern for the poor and his insistence that attachment to riches obstructs our response to the Kingdom are well recognised.¹⁸ God will reverse the circumstances of the poor, not because they are virtuous or particularly devout but simply because, in line with the long biblical tradition, God has taken on their cause. If the disciples find themselves poor, hungry, weeping and reviled because of their adherence to the gospel, then they should rejoice because God has their cause in hand.

The Matthean Beatitudes

Before considering the beatitudes in Matthew, it is important to take careful note of the context in which they occur. The traditional division of the Gospel, that begins a fresh chapter (chapter 5) at the point when Jesus ascends the mountain, sits down and starts to speak after his disciples have approached him (vv.1–2), can make us fail to notice the wider audience of the sermon, mentioned at the close of chapter 4 (vv.23–25). This audience consists of great crowds of afflicted people who have come from all over Palestine, from the Dekapolis (the Greek-speaking cities ranging in an arc around the north of Galilee), and from across the Jordan. The Gospel lingers at length upon the descriptions of the ailments of these people, who become the objects of Jesus' power to heal.

Jesus went throughout Galilee, teaching in their synagogues and proclaiming the good news of the kingdom and curing every disease and every sickness among the people and they brought to him all the sick, those who were afflicted with various diseases and pains,

¹⁶ Cf. Guelich, *Sermon on the Mount*, 68; Walter Bauer, *A Greek–English Lexicon of the New Testament and Other Early Christian Literature*, edited and revised by Frederick William Danker, third edition (Chicago: Chicago UP, 2000), 896.

¹⁷ This is to disagree here with Hamm (*Beatitudes*, 11), who in the end finds little difference between the Matthean and the Lucan formulation; cf. also W. D. Davies and Dale C. Allison, *Matthew: A Critical and Exegetical Commentary* (Edinburgh: T. and T. Clark, 1988–97), volume 1, 444.

¹⁸ See Byrne, *Hospitality of God*, 114–115.

demoniacs, epileptics, and paralytics, and he cured them. (Matthew 4:23–24)¹⁹

It is in fact in view of this afflicted crowd that Jesus ascends the mountain to deliver the sermon to his more immediate disciples: 'When Jesus saw the crowds, he went up the mountain ...' (5:1). The disciples are, then, to hear the sermon like ordinands addressed in front of a congregation. They are going to be told who they must be and how they must live in order to benefit the afflicted mass of people down below, who are allowed to 'overhear' the instruction that Jesus is about to give.

This sense that Jesus' words, and more particularly the beatitudes, are intended to teach the disciples to be something for other people is reinforced in Matthew's account by the two images that immediately follow the beatitudes. The disciples are told that they are 'the salt of the earth' that must not lose its savour (v.13) and 'the light of the world' that must not be hidden (vv.14–15). By living in the way that Jesus commends, the disciples will not only be blessed themselves, but will also be a blessing to an afflicted world that sorely needs help.



Christ Healing the Sick, by Mathieu Ignace van Bree

¹⁹ Matthew's Gospel places great stress upon Jesus as healer; cf. Brendan Byrne, *Lifting the Burden: Reading Matthew's Gospel in the Church Today* (Collegeville, Mn: Liturgical, 2004), 49–50, 78–79.

Matthew has a set of nine beatitudes, unlike Luke, who has only four, complemented by corresponding 'Woes' (6: 24–26). The ninth (vv.11–12) is really a rather prolix and formless repetition of the eighth (v.10); its inclusion may reflect Matthew's predilection for presenting material in sets of three or multiples of three. Apart from this final beatitude, the remainder form two sets of four, each set concluding with a reference to the key Matthean notion of 'righteousness'. Four of the Matthean beatitudes ('the poor in spirit' [1]; 'those who mourn' [2]; 'those who hunger and thirst for righteousness' [4]; 'those who are persecuted for righteousness' sake' [8]) have matches in the Lucan set of four ('you who are poor'; 'you who weep'; 'you who are hungry'; 'when people hate you'), which suggests that they follow an original tradition more closely. Matthew, then, or the tradition to which he was specifically indebted, would have expanded the original four with considerable input from the Psalms. The third beatitude, 'Blessed are the meek, for they will inherit the earth', is a virtual quotation from Psalm 37:11, while a phrase from the messianic prophetic text Isaiah 61:2 ('... to comfort all who mourn') seems to provide the language of the second beatitude, 'Blessed are those who mourn, for they will be comforted'.²⁰

The beatitudes—and indeed the sermon as a whole—only really make sense in relation to a distinctive vision of God (the Father) that Jesus presupposes throughout. To be meek rather than grasping (5:5); to disarm violence with generosity rather than retaliation (5:38–42); to love enemies rather than hate them (5:43–47): this amounts to a life of great vulnerability in the world's terms. It is, however, to be 'perfect' as the 'Heavenly Father is perfect' (5:48).²¹ This life reflects the nature of the God who stands behind Jesus' humble, burden-bearing mission to redeem the world. To live in this vulnerable way only makes sense in relation to God, and to God's fidelity, which will fulfil what is promised in the second half of each beatitude.

In this way the Matthean beatitudes display features of both forms of the beatitude that emanate from the biblical and later traditions.

²⁰ Guelich sees the influence of Isaiah 61 as pervasive in the Matthean beatitudes: see *Sermon on the Mount*, 71–75. Meier, *Marginal Jew*, volume 2, 380 n. 124, is less convinced; so also Davies and Allison, *Matthew*, volume 1, 445. It is noteworthy that, unlike Luke (see 4:16–21), Matthew makes no explicit citation of the Isaian text (*pace* 11:5).

²¹ In this statement, the stress falls upon the little word 'as'; cf. Byrne, *Lifting the Burden*, 62.

They conform to the older wisdom type in having an ethical-exhortatory aspect, commending attitudes and behaviour that a person can freely choose. And they conform to the apocalyptic type in promising vindication and reward to those who adopt the vulnerable pattern of life being commended.²²

Matthew's 'Poor in Spirit'

Focusing now more directly upon the first Matthean beatitude, what are we to make of the formulation 'blessed are the poor in spirit'? What does the phrase 'in spirit' add? Is this a 'spiritualisation' of an original, starker beatitude understood in a purely economic sense? Does a reference to actual poverty still remain? The matter is highly controversial.²³ This first beatitude appears in an extended list, each member of which refers primarily to a subjective disposition rather than an objective situation of disadvantage. The context, then, would suggest such a spiritualisation. Moreover, parallel phrases elsewhere, in the psalms and other biblical literature, also suggest that in the phrase 'poor in spirit' the stress lies upon 'spirit', so that the phrase would refer to those whose 'spirits' are 'poor' in the sense of humble.²⁴ By far the most prevalent interpretation, from patristic times onwards, is one in which 'poor' is interpreted metaphorically so that the phrase becomes virtually a synonym for 'the humble', with no reference to actual poverty.²⁵

Not all are convinced, however, that a connection with actual, material poverty is lacking in the Matthean formulation.²⁶ Virtually

²² Mark Alan Powell, 'Matthew's Beatitudes: Reversals and Rewards of the Kingdom', *Catholic Biblical Quarterly*, 58/3 (1996), 460–479, sees the first four Matthean beatitudes as conforming to the apocalyptic form, the second four to the wisdom form. The discussion is helpful but the neat division seems forced in some respects; cf. Ulrich Luz, *Matthew 1–7: A Commentary* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 2007), 193 n. 77.

²³ Dupont provides a critical survey of views, ancient (patristic) and modern, in his magisterial work: see *Les béatitudes*, volume 3, 385–471; also helpful is the succinct survey given by Luz, *Matthew 1–7*, 190–193.

²⁴ Cf. Dupont, *Les béatitudes*, volume 3, 386–399; Guelich, *Sermon on the Mount*, 72–73. This interpretation received a considerable boost from the Dead Sea Scrolls with the appearance in the War Scroll of a Hebrew phrase 'anwy-ruah' (1QM 14:7) that seemed to correspond exactly to the Greek *ptôchoi en pneumati* in this sense; see Dupont, *Les béatitudes*, volume 3, 389–391, 462–465. The context of the fragmentary Qumran text makes equally likely, however, a reference to a crushed spirit (that God has strengthened), rather than a disposition towards humility.

²⁵ So especially Dupont, *Les béatitudes*, volume 3, 457–471, at the conclusion of his survey, by far the most thorough undertaken by exegetes.

²⁶ I leave aside here a view that sees in the Greek phrase 'poor in spirit' a reference to the 'people of the land', the 'little people' despised by the religious leaders in the Palestine of Jesus' day; likewise the more 'psychological' view that sees a reference to those aware of their 'spiritual misery'; for a critique see Dupont, *Les béatitudes*, volume 3, 429–450.

everyone would accept that Matthew, in line with his overall presentation of the beatitudes, has broadened the concept of poverty to embrace an interior disposition. The issue is whether that interior disposition simply refers to humility, or whether it relates to the embrace or acceptance of actual poverty. Interpretations along the latter lines run mainly in two directions. There are those who see the phrase ‘in spirit’ as connoting a spirit of detachment from riches, whether a person actually possesses wealth or not. Secondly, there is the view that sees a reference to actual poverty voluntarily embraced. Each of these views occurs in both ancient and modern interpretation.²⁷ Among more recent interpreters, Jacques Dupont notes that the idea of an interior detachment from wealth, while enjoying considerable favour amongst spiritual writers generally,²⁸ has found less favour with exegetes.²⁹ The interpretation in terms of a voluntary embrace of actual poverty has been defended in recent times most vigorously by Ernst Lohmeyer (1890–1946),³⁰ in whose view the phrase ‘in spirit’ (*en pneumati*) does not spiritualise the concept of poverty but rather suggests that the Spirit gives people the inner capacity to ‘sell all and give to the poor’. For Lohmeyer it is this connotation of an inner, spiritual capacity that the Matthean formulation brings to the sense of actual poverty in the Lucan beatitude.³¹

The idea of voluntarily embracing poverty under the influence of the Spirit has clear resonances with the Ignatian formula. Yet, in terms

²⁷ With regard to interior detachment Dupont cites Clement of Alexandria, Severus of Antioch, Simeon the New Theologian and, to some degree, Augustine and Leo the Great, while with regard to the voluntary embrace of material poverty he cites Basil of Caesarea, Chromatius of Aquila and Gregory of Nyssa (*Les béatitudes*, volume 3, 411–418).

²⁸ Dupont, *Les béatitudes*, volume 3, 455.

²⁹ Two exegetes who do endorse the view are Alfred Durand, *Évangile selon Saint Matthieu* (Paris: Beauchesne, 1929), 67–68 and Joseph Bonsirven, *Le Règne de Dieu* (Paris: Aubier, 1957), 92–92; cf. Dupont, *Les béatitudes*, volume 3, 455.

³⁰ Ernst Lohmeyer was deprived of his professorship by the Nazis for defending Jewish colleagues. He was arrested and executed by the Soviet secret police during the post-war occupation of Germany on 19 September 1946. In German academic circles he is regarded as a ‘martyr theologian’ who gave his life for the values he drew from the New Testament.

³¹ Ernst Lohmeyer, *Das Evangelium nach Matthäus*, edited by Werner Schmauch (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck and Ruprecht, 1967), 83. For this view Dupont also cites (and critiques) Herman Ridderbos, André Feuillet, Georg Eicholz, I. Herrmann (*Les béatitudes*, volume 3, 420). The Austrian scholar Karl Schubert also adopted this view on the basis of what he believed to be a similar embrace of voluntary poverty in the quasi-monastic community of Qumran; see ‘The Sermon on the Mount and the Qumran Texts’, in *The Scrolls and the New Testament*, edited by Krister Stendahl (New York: Harper, 1957), 118–128. Such a ‘monastic’ view of the community behind the Dead Sea Scrolls is largely discredited today; cf. Dupont, *Les béatitudes*, volume 3, 425–426.



Jesus Teaches about Wealth

of strict exegesis, such an interpretation of the Matthean 'poor in spirit' presents difficulty from a linguistic point of view. Dupont points to the fact that the parallel beatitudes in Matthew are clearly to be understood metaphorically: 'hunger and thirst' (v.6) do not imply physical hunger and thirst; and 'pure in heart' (v.8) cannot be restricted to a desire for bodily purity alone.³²

Nonetheless, it seems too simplistic to read 'poor in spirit' as a bare reference to humility without any connotation of actual poverty.³³ Robert A. Guelich, for example, draws a parallel with the eighth beatitude (v.10): 'Blessed are those who are persecuted for righteousness' sake'. Persecution is an objective condition rather than a subjective attitude. At the risk of being over-subtle, I would like to

³² Dupont, *Les béatitudes*, volume 3, 425, 428–429; cf. also Davies and Allison, *Matthew*, volume 1, 444.

³³ Lambrecht, for example, considers that Dupont relies too heavily upon the Hebrew background: 'One may not assume that Matthew and his readers understood the Greek phrase in the Hebrew sense' (*Sermon on the Mount*, 65).

suggest that the Matthean ‘poor in spirit’ can mean something in between the alternatives mentioned above: the interior attitude of detachment and the voluntary embrace of actual poverty. Within a wider attitude of detachment from wealth, it would include a bias towards actual poverty, a desire for actual poverty, whether or not the person were already living in a state of actual poverty.

The Matthean Beatitudes: The Vulnerable Way of the Kingdom

As I have already indicated, the Matthean beatitudes, broadly speaking, do not address situations in which people find themselves willy-nilly. Rather, they pronounce a blessing on those who have rendered themselves vulnerable or disadvantaged in some way.

The second beatitude, ‘Blessed are those who mourn’ (v.4), could seem to be an exception, in that ‘mourning’ would not seem to be a matter of choice. It is significant, however, that Matthew has selected—or received from his tradition—the Greek word *penthountes*, translated as *mourn*, rather than *weep* (*klaiontes*) as in Luke (6:21b). Whereas ‘weep’ would simply indicate a response to the personal experience of pain, loss or deprivation, ‘mourn’ evokes a sense of sorrow and sympathy for distress on a wider scale.³⁴ Those who ‘mourn’ in this sense are people who, whatever their own personal circumstances, are sensitive to the pain of others.

The third beatitude, ‘Blessed are the meek’ (v.5; and cf. Psalm 37:11), is particularly open to misunderstanding if the adjective is taken in its common English sense. The Greek word *praus* denotes a gentleness proceeding from inner strength—the opposite of being grasping, wanting to ‘have it all now’ at the expense of others. The meek in this sense do not see life as a competition; they can choose to step back and let others go forward. The Matthean Jesus chooses this term to describe himself: ‘Take my yoke upon you, and learn from me; for I am gentle and humble in heart, and you will find rest for your souls’ (11:29).

In the fourth beatitude (v.6), ‘those who hunger and thirst for righteousness’ (*dikaïosynê*), it is tempting to give the Greek word its traditional Catholic translation of *justice*. Then one can find here a blessing upon those who dedicate themselves to the pursuit of social

³⁴ Cf. Davies and Allison, *Matthew*, volume 1, 448.

justice. 'Righteousness' is, however, a technical term in Matthew. It describes living or aspiring to live according to the correct norm in view of one's covenant relationship with God and with fellow human beings.³⁵ In Matthew's Jewish frame of reference that norm is essentially expressed in observance of the Law of Moses (Torah). For Matthew, however, this observance is authoritatively reinterpreted by Jesus, for whom the demands of justice and mercy are paramount. Righteousness consists in doing what God wants, as illustrated and enacted above all in the life of Jesus.³⁶ To 'hunger and thirst for righteousness', then, can be understood in both a passive and an active sense. It can mean longing that God's will be done, that God's rule come in the sense of the second petition of the Lord's Prayer (6:10); it can also, more actively, have the sense of longing that one's life be taken up into and become part of the entire economy of salvation pursued by the Son of God. Since the fulfilment of justice in the world is an essential element of that economy, in a roundabout kind of way, 'to hunger and thirst for righteousness' is indeed to dedicate one's life to the promotion of justice in the world.³⁷

The remaining beatitudes all connote a similar acceptance of vulnerability for the sake of others. To be 'merciful' (v.7) is to choose understanding, compassion and forgiveness, where in strict justice one could take a harder line. In this connection the Matthean Jesus appeals twice to Hosea 6:6 to indicate that mercy is what God wants (9:13; 12:7; cf. the parable of the Unforgiving Servant, 18:23–35; also 'the weightier matters of the law: justice and mercy and faith', 23:23). 'Pure of heart' (v.8) reflects language taken from the pilgrim psalm, Psalm 24 [LXX 23], v.4, v.6), where the context suggests those who can stand in complete honesty and integrity before God.³⁸ Such persons do not try to surround themselves with the false protection afforded by pretence or deceit. While the reference is primarily to openness before God, such persons also present a similar vulnerable openness before human beings. 'Peacemakers' (v.9) undertake a (usually costly) commitment to bringing about harmony and reconciliation as opposed to conflict, violence and war.

**Acceptance of
vulnerability for
the sake of others**

³⁵ Cf. Luz, *Matthew 1–7*, 195–196; Guelich, *Sermon on the Mount*, 84–87.

³⁶ See Byrne, *Lifting the Burden*, 39–40.

³⁷ Cf. Guelich, *Sermon on the Mount*, 103.

³⁸ Cf. Guelich, *Sermon on the Mount*, 90.

The two closing beatitudes (v.10 and v.11) address, with some variation in terminology, the experience of persecution. In both cases the persecuted find themselves in such a situation because of a prior choice: to adhere to righteousness, in the Matthean sense of commitment to the path traced out by Jesus (v.10), or simply to affirm their personal union with him (v.11).³⁹ Once again, and climactically, the blessing falls upon those who have freely chosen to adhere closely to Jesus and his saving mission on behalf of the afflicted mass of the world.

In reviewing the Matthean beatitudes, I have not so far considered the second part of each one: the eschatological vindication or reward promised to those who have been commended. In this



The Sermon on the Mount, from the *Prayerbook of Hildegard of Bingen*

respect the Matthean beatitudes adhere to the apocalyptic form. The central series of beatitudes, from the second to the seventh, express this future vindication in language suggestive of conventional Jewish hopes for the messianic age.⁴⁰ But in the first and eighth beatitudes the formulation 'theirs is the Kingdom of Heaven' (v.3, v.10) is expressed in the present tense, reflecting the idea that the Rule of God is at once a present gift and a future destination.⁴¹

It is, here and now, a free offer of renewed

³⁹ Cf. Powell, 'Matthew's Beatitudes', 474.

⁴⁰ Cf. Byrne, *Lifting the Burden*, 56.

⁴¹ Byrne, *Lifting the Burden*, 35–37, 48; Guelich, *Sermon on the Mount*, 76–79.

relationship with God; and it will be the promised consummation when, with the reign of evil finally overcome, the faithful will enjoy life with God and the transformed existence that was always the Creator's intention for human beings. The resurrection of Jesus, as the vindication of the One who became 'obedient to the point of death' (Philippians 2:8) to set the world free from the grip of evil, is the 'first fruits' (cf. 1 Corinthians 15:20) of the triumph of God's rule. In the power of the Spirit, believers see that saving event as the manifestation of the Father's fidelity to the Son who made himself vulnerable to evil for the rescue of the world. They can hope that the God who remained faithful to the Son will remain faithful to them when, in imitation of him and union with him, they too make themselves vulnerable to evil as part of the same mission.

Clearly, I have moved here beyond anything explicit in the Matthean beatitudes. I do not believe, however, that there is any good reason for excluding a christological implication. The path of 'righteousness' that Jesus is commending in the beatitudes and in the Sermon as a whole is simply the path that he himself has followed. All dispositions and situations in the beatitudes apply *par excellence* and exemplarily to him.⁴² If we recall how the beatitudes are 'framed' by the vision of the afflicted crowd (4:21–23) and by the images of 'salt' and 'light' (5:13–16), we can see that in the Sermon on the Mount Jesus was commending to his immediate disciples a way of living that will build their lives into his 'righteousness' and hence into the sweep of his saving mission for the world. It is, like his own, a vulnerable way of life in terms of this world's values and expectations—specifically in its preference for the vulnerability of actual poverty over the protection of wealth. But it is a 'blessed' way of life, both because of the fidelity of the Father and also because those who become vulnerable in union with Jesus can be a blessing for the afflicted. It is the vulnerable who make life safe for humanity—or, to express the matter more appropriately—who humanise the world under the grace of God.

⁴² Cf. Jesus' self-description in Matthew 11:28–30; also his fulfilment of the 'burden-bearing' role of the Servant in 8:16–17 and 12:15–21.

The Matthean Beatitudes and Ignatius

What I have been attempting to suggest here is that the desire that Ignatius commends in the petitions of the Second Week, leading up to the Third Degree of Humility, is essentially one with that which Jesus was commending to his disciples in the Matthean beatitudes. When Ignatius wrote of being received ‘in the highest spiritual poverty ... and ... not less in actual poverty’ he was truly in line with the Matthean formulation as understood in the light of current biblical scholarship. Ignatius, as a person and a Christian of his time, may have been innocent of the more critical findings of that scholarship but his insight is fully in accord with it. When directors explain these demanding exercises today it may help for them to know (and perhaps to place before those they are guiding) that what retreatants are pondering and being invited to desire is nothing more nor less than living according to the beatitudes, in deep personal union with Christ and commitment to his saving mission.⁴³

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⁴³ This sense of involvement in Christ’s saving mission may go some way to meet the charge launched against the petition in the colloquies of the Second Week by J. L. Segundo (*The Christ of the Ignatian Exercises*, edited and translated by John Drury [Maryknoll, NY: Orbis, 1987]), who complains (54–61, 100–101) of a ‘christological vacuum’ and a sense that the retreatant is being placed in a situation of personal ascetical ‘test’ rather than co-opted for a way of life that may truly address the situation of the world.