

Acquiring the appetite for the right – Blessed are those who hunger and thirst...

As we continue our Lenten journey towards Easter through the Beatitudes, this morning we are exploring the beautifully evocative beatitude, Blessed are those who hunger and thirst for righteousness, for they shall be satisfied.

What are beatitudes?

Before we dive in, I want to take a moment to reflect on what Beatitudes are. For there is danger when we do a series like this focussing on the Beatitudes, that we slip into thinking of them as some sort of moral code. That this is how we earn God's blessing. Or they are spiritual or philosophical formulas for how life works. N.T. Wright puts it this way:

*“Jesus is not suggesting that these are simply timeless truths about the way the world is, about human behaviour. If he was saying that he was wrong. Mourners often go uncomforted, the meek don't inherit the earth, those who long for justice frequently take that longing to the grave. This is an upside-down world, or perhaps a right-way-up world; and Jesus is saying that with his work **it's starting to come true. This is an announcement, not a philosophical analysis of the world. It's about something that's starting to happen, not about a general truth of life. It is gospel: good news, not good advice.**”*

The Beatitudes are the declaration that turn the world upside down. Declaring that God's favour is with, and for those whom the world despises. Of course, there's transformative power to receiving this Good News, to renew our thinking, our desires, our values, and as we will see today, hopefully our appetites. Of course there is, otherwise why would we read and proclaim the gospel. But it is important to remember, we are proclaiming the blessing, not exploring how we might go about earning it.

So, with that in mind: Blessed are those who hunger and thirst for righteousness, for they shall be satisfied. Such an evocative statement isn't. And it is unique amongst the Beatitudes. It does not say 'blessed are those who work for righteousness.' It is certainly not 'blessed those who are righteous.' But those who hunger and thirst. Those who have a longing for righteousness. Those who ache at the very core to see the world set right. They are blessed not for a possessed righteousness, but a desired righteousness.

I think it is worded this way to prevent any thinking that we have, or might somehow, make it on our owns. It is not 'blessed are the righteous' for we are not ever fully righteous on our own terms. To understand why, we need to define what is meant here by righteousness.

Words like righteousness can often be vague religious concepts that we fail to concretely define, or they become laden with later theological developments.

What does righteousness mean?

No one can be fully righteous on their own because righteousness is a social concept. Righteousness as we are to understand it here is not ethical perfection. The concept, both in the Greek and Hebrew is intertwined with Justice. In fact, in the Hebrew Bible, the Hebrew word translated 'righteousness', **הַקְדָּוָה**, is usually found in parallel with **מִשְׁפָּט**, Justice. An act of **הַקְדָּוָה**, righteousness, is an act that seeks to set things right, bringing about Justice and Shalom (peace, wholeness and integrity) for all, but especially the poor who have been deprived of justice. In fact, an adjective from this noun, **קָדִיֵּץ**, used to describe the righteous person is often used in parallel in the Hebrew Bible for the poor person whose cause is righteous, or blameless. The word emphasises action and activity rather than condition. It has a sense of movement. That is, it's action that move towards justice, and right order. That which moves the social fabric towards all that is good and right in God's eyes.

So, when Jesus says, "Blessed are those who hunger and thirst for righteousness," first and foremost, he is declaring a right-way-up Kingdom blessing upon all those desperate poor whose cause for justice has been perverted.

A couple of years ago we did a series on prophetic voices. I preached from Amos. This theme, of the perversion of justice and righteousness for the poor is central to Amos' critique of Israel. Particularly, the perversion of justice at the gates. This covers two broad areas. The courts, or the institutional powers that govern people's lives, and the marketplace. The courts were the primary location for restoring integrity or 'rightness' in the social fabric, it was important that its members were righteous. The ninth Commandment, "You shall not bear false witness against your neighbour" gives us insight into how important righteousness is in this process to God. Core to practising **הַקְדָּוָה** is judging impartially in court.

The other primary location for justice is the marketplace, which was also physically located at the town gate. The Law called for scales, weights and measures that were **קָדִיֵּץ**. An aspect of justice is what is one's legal right or due and it belongs to the poor because they have the right to expect a fair deal. In this sense we can speak of justice in the marketplace not just as

a moral norm but a human right. Hence to practice $\eta\kappa\tau\upsilon\chi$ includes a special form of justice towards the poor. A catchphrase of Liberation Theology is that “God has a preferential option for the poor.” However, as John Collins points out, God’s preference is not for the poor but for justice, it just so happens that “the rich are much more likely to encroach on the poor than vice versa, and it is the poor, not the rich, who need assurances of divine protection.” It is also the poor who are most likely to be cheated of justice in the courts, especially if the interests of the judges in the court have become entangled with the interests of the sellers in the marketplace.

While we don’t do our business or administer justice at the town gates, it doesn’t take too much imagination to connect this to today. The large-ness and impersonal-ness of our bureaucratic governing systems and incomprehensible face-less marketplace increases the capacity for injustice and the perversion of righteousness. These two are often intertwined, despite best intentions of our political leaders, too often the ‘money gets the power and the power protects the money.’

Two categories who hunger and thirst

So obviously, there is for the poor-oppressed, a natural hunger-pang for righteousness and justice. Like a person hungry and thirsty needs food and water, so the poor oppressed longs for righteousness. It is a natural longing. Commentator Frederick Bruner writes of these people: “They long for what is right, they crave justice, they cannot live without God’s victory prevailing; for them right relations in the world are not just a luxury or a mere hope but an absolute necessity if they are to live at all.”

But what about the rest of us, those who don’t identify as the poor-oppressed? For the rest of us I want to suggest, that to hunger and thirst for righteousness is an acquired appetite. “Among those who long for God to set things right are both those who themselves suffer hunger pangs **and** those who mourn over an inequitable distribution of goods and services that allows millions to starve.”

How do we acquire an appetite for righteousness to prevail? Well, firstly we need exposure. Apparently, when you want to get a kid to eat a new, *healthy* food, they need to be exposed to it 12-30 times. Likewise, we need to be exposed to injustice and the right being denied to hunger for it. John Nolland writes: Righteousness... the desire to see things put right... “is a

reflex of the sense of deprivation in the present.” The precise contours of the sense of need and therefore the specific focus of the hunger and thirst will be shaped by what has been experienced and how it has been understood and related to. It is an “acquired appetite.”

Secondly, the appetite is developed and shaped by getting to know God’s heart. Our reading this morning from 2 Corinthians makes the link between righteousness and the provision of material needs to the needy-poor: “He scatters abroad, he gives to the poor, his righteousness endures forever.” He who supplies seed to the sower and bread for food will supply and multiply your seed for sowing and increase the harvest of your righteousness.

Paul is saying to the Corinthian Church, to meet the needs of the poor Jerusalem will make their righteousness like God’s.

Likewise, John writes in 1 John 3 when discussing those who practices righteousness, he says, “if anyone who has the world’s goods and sees a brother or sister in need, and closes their heart to them, how can they have the love of God in them?”

Thirdly, we can ask ourselves, what is getting in the way of that appetite? How am I currently satiated that I am not hungry for the right. Greed, hunger for power, prestige and possession cannot co-exist with a hunger for righteousness. For righteousness and justice are at odds with these goals. When our goals are at odds with the needs of the poor, then we cannot hunger and thirst for righteousness. If the way we vote is about protecting our own interests, rather than the interests of the poor and marginalised, we cannot hunger and thirst for righteousness. What might you be hungering for that gets in the way of hungering and thirsting for the right, the good and the just to prevail?

Sometimes however, our problem is not that we are satiated, but that we are overwhelmed. We can be overwhelmed by the needs and the perceived injustices.

What can we do with the longing? Pray and act.

Regardless of where we are at in life, regardless of whether our hunger and thirst for right to be done, is a natural or an acquired appetite, first and always, this longing will drive us to our knees to pray. Lord your Kingdom Come, your Will be done. Give us today our daily bread. Save us from the time of trial and deliver us from evil. We can pray. Again, the contours of our prayers shaped by the exposure and experience to a sense of deprivation.

We can act. What might creative, Holy Spirit solutions look like to righting wrongs in your context? In your job? In whatever age and stage of life you find yourself in. How can we put that longing to action? To use our voice to speak to elected officials. How about how we spend our money, to ensure as much as we can, that our transactions are just, and establish the right and the good? If your issue is being overwhelmed, what is **one thing** you could do this week, to begin to work towards the good and right in your life?

Longing for the Kingdom when all shall be set right

I want to finish this morning by looping back to the quote from N.T. Wright. That “those who long for justice frequently take that longing to the grave. (But)... Jesus is saying that with his work **it’s starting to come true. This is an announcement, It’s about something that’s starting to happen.**” Righteousness is a just social order that will only be finally and fully achieved in God’s Kingdom, that we yet work towards in the present. Neither public policy or the so called ‘free market’ will ever bring this about.

Until that Great and Glorious Day, there will always be wrongs that need to right. This appetite for righteousness, this hunger and thirst will always remain with us. Many longings we shall take to the grave. Our hope in the resurrection of Christ is that that is not the end of the story. That one day, every soul that longed for the world to be set right shall be satisfied. Their thirst quenched.

Prayer: And so even now, loving God, we hold before you in silence those longings for the world to be set right that we do not even know how to pray for, let alone work towards. Injustices far beyond that which we can even begin to comprehend. Systemic and historical issues that seem impossible to redress. The Spirit and the Church say, “Come, Lord Jesus.