



# Blessed Living IN OUR TIMES

ELAINE WAINWRIGHT describes how the Matthean beatitudes 5:1-12 hold the key to relationships which will help us care for the whole Earth community.

The text challenges the ecological reader in two ways. First, its familiarity means we tend not to notice what's really being said – we hear only what we've heard before. And second, because it seems to focus very specifically on the human community and human virtues. But having taken up the challenge to read the beatitudes from an ecological perspective, I have found them rich in what we might call ecological ethics.

The opening two verses (Mt 5:1-2) are rich in inter-contextuality. This means that the human and the other-than-human interact subtly and collaboratively in the text even though Jesus functions as key character in these verses. He *sees* the crowd, a simple statement that links him to the human community, and he *goes up* the mountain, reminding readers that all that is human takes place *in a context, a material context*. This context in particular is rich in symbolism. Within Israel's religious tradition, mountains are places of encounter with the divine, for Abraham (Gen 22:2-19), Moses (Ex 19:1-6) and many others. The text states explicitly that Jesus sits down on the mountain – on the earth itself, which acts as an authorising agent for what takes place there.

The first word that the crowd hears is *makarioi*: fortunate, happy, privileged, blessed. It is an affirmation of members of the human community, those who live the virtues that will be praised by the nine-fold repetition of *makarioi*. So, the invitation to hear these well-known beatitudes ecologically is to hear them anew.



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## Matthew 5:1-12

- 1 When Jesus saw the crowds, he went up the mountain; and after he sat down, his disciples came to him. 2 Then he began to speak, and taught them, saying:
- 3 "Blessed are the poor in spirit, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven.
- 4 "Blessed are those who mourn, for they will be comforted.
- 5 "Blessed are the meek, for they will inherit the earth.
- 6 "Blessed are those who hunger and thirst for righteousness, for they will be filled.
- 7 "Blessed are the merciful, for they will receive mercy.
- 8 "Blessed are the pure in heart, for they will see God.
- 9 "Blessed are the peacemakers, for they will be called children of God.
- 10 "Blessed are those who are persecuted for righteousness' sake, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven.
- 11 "Blessed are you when people revile you and persecute you and utter all kinds of evil against you falsely on my account. 12 Rejoice and be glad, for your reward is great in heaven, for in the same way they persecuted the prophets who were before you."

## Poor in Spirit

The "poor in spirit" are the first proclaimed *makarioi*/blessed (Mt 5:3). This phrase does not appear anywhere else in the Jewish scriptures or in Greek texts of the first century. Scholars recognise in it, however, echoes of the virtue of humility that was highly prized in antiquity. Such a virtue recognised what the human person shares with all Earth's constituents. It is a virtue essential to our contemporary ecological ethics.

The second half of the beatitude gives the reason for this blessedness – the *basileia*/kin(g)dom of the heavens is theirs. John (Mt 3:2) and Jesus (Mt 4:17) are proclaiming

this kin(g)dom. It is a vision for right relationships at the heart of the Matthean Gospel. The ecological reader understands the vision extending relationships from just within the human community to those in the entire Earth community.

### Those Who Mourn

The second proclamation of ‘honour’ or ‘blessing’ is of those who mourn (Mt 5:4). Members of the human community mourn when they lose someone or something they hold dear (Gen 23:2, 37:34; 50:3; 1Sam 15:35) as do members of the other-than-human community. But also in Hosea 4:3, the land and all beings who live in it mourn as Earth’s creatures vanish (see, Is 33:9; Jer 4:28; 12:4); and people mourn this fate of Earth (Amos 8:8).

Mourning accompanies the breakdown of relationships in the Earth community and in the community’s relationship with the Divine. Grief and mourning for broken relationships characterise many today who work for ecological transformation. Just as they characterise Earth creatures experiencing the loss of habitats and companions at the hands of the human community. However, mourning is not to become a permanent state for those who seek the gospel vision of Jesus. Rather, their comfort is in a commitment to the flourishing of diversity.

### Humble Meek

We might notice the close relationship between the first and the third beatitudes: the “poor in spirit” and the “meek”. Both can be characterised as “humble”. To understand this connection, we can read Psalms 37 in which the phrase “shall inherit the earth” occurs five times. In particular, Ps 37:11 names the “meek” as inheritors.

And also Israel’s tradition is strong in the recognition that the land belongs to God (Num 26:53; Ps 105:11). Israel’s task is to till and keep it (Gen 2:15); to be in right relationship with it. This beatitude could have offered hope to a first-century Galilean audience whose land was being confiscated by Roman landlords.

### Right Relationships

Righteousness/right ordering/right relationship is the virtue praised or honoured in both the fourth and eighth beatitudes. It is a key Matthean virtue preached in the Sermon (Mt 5:6, 10, 20; 6:1, 23) and in Ps 85:10-13 it is repeatedly linked with other key virtues:

Steadfast love and faithfulness will meet  
*Righteousness* and peace will kiss each other  
 Faithfulness will spring up from the ground,  
*Righteousness* will look down from the sky.  
 God will give what is good  
 And our land will yield its increase.  
*Righteousness* will go before God,  
 And will make a path for God’s steps.

This righteousness or right ordering is to characterise Divine, human and other-than-human interrelationships. Within them ecological and social justice meet and embrace. However, right ordering needs to be worked out in each unique location and community, each habitat and ecosystem. In so doing those hungering and thirsting for right relationships will be satisfied.

### Practising Compassion

The sermon gives us three additional ways of living the right relationships that characterise the new vision that Jesus preaches. Those who show mercy participate in the mercy of God and are caught up in a spiral of mercy (Mt 5:7). Compassion is not confined to the human community. Our hearts break when we see the ravages of Earth and all Earth’s creatures by wanton industrialisation and destruction. Can we receive compassion that heals such pain?

### God Is with the Whole Earth Community

The pure in heart (Mt 5:8) are named blessed and promised that they shall see God. It is through our body, our heart and our eyes, that we can see and know God. We know that God is “with us” as Mt 1:23 tells us. That “us” is not just the human community as we usually think. Rather, God has entered into a unique relationship with the entire Earth community. We need to call on all our senses, all our bodiliness, to engage fully in this relationship. It is this which makes for peace – an ecological peace (Mt 5:9).

The idea of reading the beatitudes ecologically is new. It extends the invitation to repentance as preached in the Gospel of Matthew (Mt 3:2; 4:17) beyond the human to the other-than-human community. We are on the very threshold of a response to that invitation and each of us is invited to participate. We might reflect and talk to others about how we are invited to articulate the beatitudes afresh in the face of the ecological imperative. 🌱



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