



## Proper 4, Year A – January 30, 2011

Matthew 5.1-12

### A Homily preached by the Venerable M. Ansley Tucker

Jesus goes up the mountain (yes, this is the "Sermon on the Mount"), sits down, and casts a long look over the crowd. I imagine him sizing them up, and then he preaches a sermon with something for everybody. Blessed are the poor in spirit, blessed are those who mourn, blessed is the little guy (that would be the "meek"), blessed are those who are persecuted, and so on, and so on.

Except, on first reading, you've got to wonder about how his message would have been received – because the Beatitudes (this long list of "blesseds" – the Latin word for blessed is *beatus*) are pretty short on "deliverables." There are lots of promises here – the bereaved *will be* comforted, the pure in heart *will see* God, the merciful *will receive* mercy – but frankly, there's not much here that the poor peasants of Galilee can take back down the mountain with them at the end of the liturgy.

But this, I contend, is exactly the point. Jesus sees how the people live. He sees their struggles. He sees people living in what Thoreau called "lives of quiet desperation," and he names their pain for what it is. *That* will be their first "take away:" this Jesus understands us. And the second is this: "*This* isn't all there is, and there's no giving up until what will be will be."

In other words, and this is what I want to talk about, the Beatitudes are an expression of profound *hope*. They call us to adopt hope as our posture towards life. Because half the battle in getting from what is to what will be is *attitude*.

Hope is what gets you out of bed in the morning. It is what motivates you to endure another painful treatment, or to try, once again, to have a civil conversation with your parents/children. Hope stems from the conviction that nothing worth doing is achievable in our lifetime, but that somebody (and it may as well be you) has to start somewhere. Hope is never to give up believing that better is possible.

And the opposite of hope? Resignation. Or worse, cynicism. .

Resignation is to give up. It is to accept your reality, even though you don't like it, and even though you don't have to. It is to style ourselves the "victim," and to imagine that we are the helpless objects of forces beyond our control. People who are resigned to their life are the sort of people who suck the energy out of room. They withdraw, or resign from, active engagement in life. Such resignation is a sin.

Cynicism is a more toxic version of resignation – the cynic may also have given up, but he or she throws in a soupçon of anger and blame. For the cynic has precious little faith in people: people are "too stupid," or "too cheap," or "too selfish" to change. Cynics are negative, negative people. Their humour is often sarcastic and biting; and they won't help or get involved because they don't think it will make any difference, anyway. Such cynicism is also a sin.

Let me offer you an example from A.A. Milne's Winnie the Pooh. Eeyore, the donkey, is a depressive admixture of cynicism *and* resignation. Eeyore has been examining his reflection in the stream, and has just pronounced it "pathetic:"

*There was a crackling noise in the bracken behind him, and out came Pooh.*

*"Good morning, Eeyore," said Pooh.*

*"Good morning, Pooh Bear," said Eeyore gloomily. "If it is a good morning," he said. "Which I doubt," said he. "* [That's cynicism.]

*"Why, what's the matter?"*

*"Nothing, Pooh Bear, nothing. We can't all, and some of us don't. That's all there is to it."*

*"Can't all what?" said Pooh, rubbing his nose.*

*"Gaiety. Song-and-dance. Here we go round the mulberry bush."*

*"Oh!" said Pooh. He thought for a long time, and then asked, "What mulberry bush is that?"*

*"Bon-hommy," went on Eeyore gloomily. "French word meaning bonhommy," he explained. "I'm not complaining, but There It Is."<sup>1</sup>*

*[And that, my friends, is resignation.]*

Perhaps there are those thinking, well, if your life was like Eeyore's you'd be down-in-mouth, too, and why not?

But you see, that is exactly where Jesus and the Beatitudes come in. Jesus is not sugar-coating people's reality. He gets that the *status quo* (to quote Eeyore) is "pathetic." But Jesus refuses to get stuck there. Jesus preaches hope. And hope, as the Church understands it, is so much more than wishful thinking. As a matter of fact, it is the teaching of the Church that hope is a *virtue*.

I will grant that we may not usually think of virtues this way. We tend to think of virtue in the sense of something we do. Micah's justice, kindness, and obedience (which is another way of saying "walking humbly with your God"): these are what we think of as virtues. And so they are.

But there is another kind of virtue, a higher kind of virtue, which we are also called to cultivate. This sort of virtue doesn't describe *behaviours*, such as taking casseroles to the sick, or walking little old ladies across the street. This kind of virtue has to do with *attitude*, with the stance we take and cultivate towards life.

And in the Christian dispensation, we are every bit as accountable for our attitudes, for how we think about things, as we are for our outward actions. Christian faith calls us to a higher standard than what is merely legal or moral.

Listen carefully, by way of example, to the confession that we make week by week: "We confess that we have sinned against you by *thought, word and deed...*"

Deeds, we get. It is incumbent upon me to refrain from stealing, murder, adultery, smacking my recalcitrant child, or running red lights. And it is generally assumed that I have control over my actions, and therefore that if I transgress, I am and ought to be held accountable to society for these deeds.

Words, we also understand. It is incumbent upon me to refrain not only from lies, and slander, and libel (which are illegal), but also from gossip, and whining (which are immoral). And it is generally assumed that I am in control of my own tongue, and therefore that I am and ought to be held accountable to society for the things that I say and write.

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<sup>1</sup> A. A. Milne, *The World of Pooh: The Complete Winnie-the-Pooh and The House at Pooh Corner* (Toronto: McClelland & Stewart, 1957), pp 70-72.

Deeds and words are “out there.” We can see and assess the good or the evil that they do. But *thought*? No court in this land will hold you accountable for the thoughts of your heart – only for the deeds and the words they engender. Because, how could they? Nobody but you knows what’s going on inside your soul!

And yet, week by week, the Church confesses that we have sinned in *thought*, word, and deed. Week by week we beg God to “cleanse the *thoughts of our hearts*.” In other words, we are accountable for our thoughts; we believe attitude to be within our control. We are not at the mercy of the little tapes that play in our heads, or the cynical ruminations which infect our hearts.

All of which is to say, Hope is something we can work at, and cultivate. And indeed, to do so is a gospel imperative.

Because Jesus is right. This isn’t all there is, and there’s no giving up until what will be will be.