



# TRINITY EPISCOPAL CHURCH

*on the Branford Green*

May you find Christ, Community and Compassion within these historic walls.

***Poor in Spirit – It's a good thing.***

**January 30, 2011**

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In February's newsletter I wrote an article about the Episcopal Church, its history and the particular gift of the *via media* – the Middle Way. It is a way of thinking that rejects an "either/or" view and instead embraces a "both/and" approach to the challenges of our lives, be they theological or otherwise. It's not as easy and straightforward a way to live as the certainty that is carved out by yes and no, but it leads to a more nuanced and deeper understanding of God, humanity, and the complex world in which we live. When chaos is met with the order that is divine wisdom, the result is not something that lends itself to the simplicity of "either/or". The *via media* allows us to find truth in metaphor and story. As I spent this week immersed in the Beatitudes, I realized how grateful I am for that place of ambiguity, the in between place of Anglican spirituality, for the more I dug into this portion of the Sermon on the Mount, the more I needed the *via media*.

I started my inquiry into the Beatitudes this week thinking about the ambiguity of the scene in which Jesus delivered this sermon so seemingly full of enigma. On the day that I visited the Mount of the Beatitudes with the group from my seminary, we went out on the water in a replica of a first century fishing boat; we even learned how to cast a net. The engines were cut and we sat in the silence on the Sea of Galilee; the hillside made a natural amphitheater and the sound of our voices from the boat easily traveled up the hill. I could imagine the people flocking to hear this amazing preacher, as they sat on the hill, overlooking the sea, listening to his every word. But it says in Matthew that he went up the mountain and sat down to teach them. In the history of Judaism, mountaintops were always the place where God was experienced. In other words, Matthew tells us about the mountain not so much to describe the beauty of the area, although certainly it must have been idyllic, as to portray the divinity of Jesus and emphasize the importance of that particular sermon.

Now let's take a look at the substance of what Jesus preached. Biblical scholars are quite divided about these beloved teachings. Some say that Jesus is talking about a future state – "when" God's kingdom comes, these will be the ones who take part. Other scholars see it as Jesus' way of describing what we ought to aspire to in order to bring about the Kingdom of God on earth. Is it either one or the other, or is it both?



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Things are not made clearer by the ambiguous language Jesus himself uses – the first and most cryptic beatitude says, “Blessed (or Happy, depending on how you translate it) are the poor in spirit for theirs *is* the Kingdom of Heaven. This is clearly framed in the present tense, as is the last one, “Blessed are those who are persecuted for my sake for theirs *is* the Kingdom of Heaven. All the others are in the future – they will inherit, they will be called... I think that Jesus was engaging in a real *via media* approach here. It is possible to begin to live as if God’s Kingdom has come, but at the same time the world will not immediately be transformed, which means that there will be other ways in which we will have to evolve before the Kingdom will be realized. Actually, when you think about it, it’s rather ingenious of him, because he essentially make these teachings applicable during his time, during our lifetimes 2000 years later, and at some unknown time when the whole world is redeemed and reconciled to God’s vision of peace and justice.

I spent the most time this week on that pesky first beatitude – “Blessed are the poor in spirit...” On the face of it, this has never made sense to me – how can being poor in spirit be a good thing? As it turns out, it’s a very good thing; it’s just really hard to do and maintain. There are two words in Greek that one might use to mean “poor.” One is *penance* – the kind of poverty that would apply to the concept of the working poor—in other words, it’s not hopeless but it takes a huge effort to overcome. The other one is *ptokos*, which means to be so poor that there is nothing one can do, and that is the one used in the beatitude. *Ptokos* implies that help must come from elsewhere, that you cannot make it on your own. This poverty is absolute dependence.

The inner meaning of this beatitude comes into focus even better when we consider the “*in spirit*” part. The Greek word for spirit is *pneuma* – which also means *breath*. Put these words together and it becomes much clearer that Jesus was referring to those who are aware of their absolute dependence on God for even the most elemental thing. Without God, we do not have life or breath.

The definition of *pneuma* can take us even a bit further – it has in its cloud of meaning a sense of the rational spirit of a person—what we would think of as “the mind”. So if we are “poor in spirit”—*ptokos ha pneuma*—it means that we know our minds are always connected to the Mind of God, not the product of our own intelligence and that our very existence is part of something much larger. To return to the Teilhard de Chardin wisdom of last week, that we are not human beings seeking a spiritual experience, but that we are spiritual beings having a human experience, we could say that being poor in spirit means that we know we are spiritual beings and that the vagaries of this world, this human experience, have no permanent power over us. It is a kind of humility that places God at the center, as the prime mover and source of everything in our lives.



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So here we find ourselves back in the “both/and” place of the *via media*. When you know that you are “poor in spirit”, you are blessed not only by your awareness that you are dependent upon God for everything but also by your understanding that you cannot be overwhelmed by the vicissitudes of life. No one moves through life without difficulties and sorrows, but if we become poor in spirit, we can be confident that God is present and that the tough times will pass. When we become poor in spirit, power and fame and fortune lose their allure, and fear of scarcity loses its grip. Our lives take on a mission quality because God is working through everything we do.

I cannot imagine embracing this poverty of spirit alone, it seems too big. Perhaps it is for that reason that we have all been called together to be a spiritual community, working toward maturity with one another’s help. It feels like it might be possible that way. Blessed are we.