

AN AGE OF GLOBAL DISCONTENT

Lessons from the Sermon on the Mount

Ephesians 5:15:16 “So be careful how you live. Don't live like ignorant people, but like wise people. Make good use of every opportunity you have, because these are evil days.”



Compiled by Mike Burnard

Humanity is currently under siege by mass protests, acts of terror, a deep-seated discontent and a generation with an ‘inherited’ anger. A common denominator in the current uprisings is that most protesters are disillusioned young people seeking an uncorrupted future, who are willing to go to any length to secure it. The ‘ARAB SPRING’, which was limited to a region, a culture and a faith, has now turned into an ‘AGE OF GLOBAL DISCONTENT’.

The voices of young “rebels” are shaping nations like never before in history and the newfound global culture of protest – magnified by social media and manipulated by local media – might result in a new season of political disillusionment. Regardless of the reason or the outcomes, every incident of unrest provides an opportunity and the Church cannot afford to be found wanting.

Hong Kong has now entered its 5th month of ongoing protests. By October more than 2,000 people had been arrested, 4,100 canisters of tear gas had been used, and 1,730 rubber bullets had been fired. Sadly, masked protesters have also unleashed their anger on the public, beating up civilians and destroying buildings and property in what was once a peaceful city.

In Iraq, the scenes are no less concerning, with more than one hundred people killed and over 6,000 injured, in just a week (1-6 October) of protests. The nation is facing the prospect of another destructive war – an internal one. Violence has gripped the hearts of the discontent young people who are tired of pleading and are now fighting for a better future.

In Egypt, an ominous uprising was halted when President Abdel-Fattah al-Sisi clamped down on protesters and closed down Tahrir square (where massive protests were a feature during the ‘Arab Spring’) after a previous week of protests, the first such uprisings in four years. Crowds haven't been as large as during the ‘Arab Spring’ of 2011, but they were large enough to cause Mr Sisi to order the arrests of more than 2,000 protesters and activists. Egypt remains a ‘powder keg’ waiting for a spark to ignite another explosion.

On the other side of the world, in Ecuador, indigenous protesters paralysed roads and blocked highways into the capital. The unrest – the worst in recent years – resulted in the arrests of more than 450 people. In Haiti, thousands of protesters took to the streets in the latest challenge to President Jovenel Moise, amid months of protests over corruption. Some of the demonstrations turned violent as protesters clashed with police, who shot tear gas and live ammunition into the air. In the capital, Port-au-Prince, several cars were torched, including four police vehicles.

But current protests are simply a continuation of a year of global discontent that began in January with uprisings in Harare, Zimbabwe. The police and military responded by raiding the homes of some residents, arresting around 200 people and killing eight citizens. On 11 April, the protests in Sudan (after eight months of continued and sustained protests and civil disobedience) saw President Omar al-Bashir finally deposed after thirty years in power. During the protests that followed,

the Rapid Support Forces and other security personnel killed 128 people, raped 70 and injured others in what became known as the Khartoum massacre (3 June).

Europe did not escape the discontent. In May, police and protesters clashed violently across Europe as tens of thousands of demonstrators took to the streets. Paris witnessed the worst confrontations, as part of the 'yellow vest protests', which have been going for almost a year (since November 2018). Riot police fired teargas and sting-ball grenades at crowds with more than 250 people being arrested after police were attacked with stones, bottles and other projectiles.

In Moscow, nearly 50,000 people attended protests demanding a free city council vote. In Algeria, thousands protested when an ailing Abdelaziz Bouteflika announced his candidacy for a possible fifth presidential term. In South Africa, violence was aimed at foreigners, when hundreds of shops were destroyed and police had to intervene. The UK saw Brexit protests, the USA saw gun-related protests and even a neutral and peaceful country like Switzerland saw climate protesters taking their fight to Swiss banks.

Few countries were spared the 'global discontent' of people seeking a better future: anger knew no borders; discontent no restraint; and violence no discrimination. Within this global context of intensified evil, the words of Ephesians 5:15-16 become particularly relevant: *"So be careful how you live. Don't live like ignorant people, but like wise people. Make good use of every opportunity you have, because these are evil days."*

Scripture is clear: days of evil will present moments of opportunity. Times of darkness provide the perfect setting for light to penetrate. Hearts without hope provide fertile soil for the message of hope to be shared. Regions in the midst of war provide the opportunity for peace to prevail. Anger can only be nullified by the 'key' of forgiveness. Only Christ is the answer and only the Church can provide solutions. This is a global opportunity that the Church needs to identify, respond to and actively provide solutions for. It is now or never.

HOW DO WE RESPOND?

As Christians we either give life or we drain life, there is no neutral exchange. Through our posts on social media and our informal communication with friends we become messengers of hope or messengers of fear. What lives in our hearts ultimately contributes to the upliftment of our communities or, alternatively, the destruction of society. To understand the warning, *"be careful how you live"* (add, be careful what you post, be careful what you forward, be careful what you say...), there is no greater guideline than the *SERMON ON THE MOUNT*, a blueprint for Christian lifestyle, and seen by most scholars as the best summary of Jesus' teachings.

(The following are excerpts from a series of devotions by Richard Rohr from the Center for Action and Contemplation - <https://cac.org/>)

"Jesus taught an alternative wisdom—the Reign of God—which overturns the conventional and common trust in power, possessions, and personal prestige. The Gospel of Matthew sets the stage for the Sermon on the Mount: Jesus sees the crowds following him and heads to 'the mountain' (symbolic for the new Moses giving a new 'law') with his disciples. This is his opening line, which necessarily must be central to his entire message; it is a key to everything else:

BLESSED ARE THE POOR IN SPIRIT

"How blessed (or 'happy') are the poor in spirit; the kingdom of Heaven is theirs." — Matthew 5:3

"Poor in spirit" means an inner emptiness and humility, a beginner's mind, and to live without a need for personal righteousness or reputation. The higher up and more visible you are in any system, the more trapped you are inside it. The freest position is the one I call "on the edge of the inside"—neither a 'company man' nor a 'rebel' or 'iconoclast'. The price of both holding power and speaking truth to power can be very great. You ricochet between being offensive and being defensive, neither of which is a contemplative or solid position. Further, you are forced to either defend and maintain the status quo to protect yourself and the group or to waste time reacting against it. The "poor in spirit" don't have to play any competitive games; they are not preoccupied with winning, which is the primary philosophy in the West today. Jesus is recommending a social reordering, quite different from common practice. You are only free when you have nothing to protect and nothing you need to prove or defend. Trapped people have to do what they want to do. Free people want to do what they know they have to do. Admittedly, it takes a while to get there.

BLESSED ARE THE GENTLE

“Blessed are the gentle [or the meek, humble, non-violent, unassuming]: they shall have the earth as inheritance.” — Matthew 5:5

This is the unique power of the powerless, which people who have always had power never understand. There is, of course, an irony here. If there was one hated group in Palestine of Jesus’ day, it was landlords, those who possess the land. Nobody possessed land except by violence, by oppression, by holding onto it and making all the peasants pay a portion of their harvest. Jesus is turning that around and saying no, it’s you little ones who are finally going to possess the land. I can hear implicit critique in his voice, but also hope.

Jesus is undoubtedly redefining the meaning of land, building on what every Jew would have known. Hebrew Scripture teaches that only God possesses the land (see Psalm 24:1; Leviticus 25:23). Private property forces us behind artificial fences, boundaries, and walls. People close to the earth know that only God “owns” the earth, and that we’re all stewards, pilgrims, and strangers with a duty and privilege of caring for it. Who will “own” our plot of land fifty years from now? Ownership is clearly not an objective or divine right, but only a legal one.

BLESSED ARE THOSE WHO MOURN

“Blessed are those who mourn: they shall be comforted.” —Matthew 5:4

Tears are therapeutic and healing, both emotionally and physically. Crying helps the body shed stress hormones and stimulates endorphins. Weeping is a natural and essential part of being human.

The Syrian Fathers Ephrem and Simeon weren’t as familiar in Western Christianity as the Greek and Latin Fathers after the early centuries of the Church. The Greek and Latin Fathers tended to filter the Gospel through the head; the Syrian Fathers’ theology was much more localised in the body. They actually proposed that tears be a sacrament in the Church. Saint Ephrem went so far as to say until you have cried you don’t know God.

Most of us think we know God—and ourselves—through ideas. Yet corporeal, embodied theology acknowledges that perhaps weeping will allow us to know God much better than ideas. In this Beatitude, Jesus praises those who can enter into solidarity with the pain of the world and not try to remove or isolate themselves from its suffering. This is why Jesus says the rich person often can’t see the Kingdom, because they spend too much time trying to make tears unnecessary and even impossible.

Jesus describes those who grieve as feeling the pain of the world. Weeping over our sin and the sin of the world is an entirely different response than self-hatred or hatred of others. Grief allows one to carry the dark side, to bear the pain of the world without looking for perpetrators or victims, but instead recognising the tragic reality that both sides are caught up in. Tears from God are always for everyone, for our universal exile from home.

BLESSED ARE THOSE WHO HUNGER FOR JUSTICE

“Blessed are those who hunger and thirst for justice: they shall have their fill.” —Matthew 5:6

This Beatitude is surely both spiritual and social. Most Bibles to this day soften this Beatitude: “hunger and thirst for what is right” or “for righteousness” are the more common faulty translations. But the word in Greek clearly means “justice.” Notice that the concept of justice is used halfway through the Beatitudes and again at the very end. The couplet emphasizes an important point: to live a just life in this world is to identify with the longings and hungers of the poor, the meek, and those who weep. This identification and solidarity is in itself a profound form of social justice.

My friend John Dear, who has spent his life in the struggle against the injustice of violence, writes about this Beatitude:

Righteousness is not just the private practice of doing good; it sums up the global responsibility of the human community to make sure every human being has what they need, that everyone pursues a fair sense of justice for every other human being, and that everyone lives in right relationship with one another, creation, and God.

. . . Jesus instructs us to be passionate for social, economic, and racial justice. That's the real meaning of the Hebrew word for justice and the Jewish insistence on it. Resist systemic, structured, institutionalised injustice with every bone in your body, with all your might, with your very soul, he teaches. Seek justice as if it were your food and drink, your bread and water, as if it were a matter of life and death, which it is. . . . Within our relationship to the God of justice and peace, those who give their lives to that struggle, Jesus promises, will be satisfied. . . .

How do we hunger and thirst for justice? By making global justice a priority in our lives. This Beatitude requires us to join a grassroots movement that fights one or two issues of injustice and to get deeply involved in the struggle. Since all issues of injustice are connected, fighting one injustice puts us squarely in the struggle against every injustice. As Martin Luther King Jr. said over and over again, "Injustice anywhere is a threat to justice everywhere." Befriend the victims of systemic injustice, side with them, listen to their stories, let their pain break your heart, join the movements to end injustice, tithe your money to the cause, and commit yourself to the struggle. . . .

While [it] may take a long time, our nonviolent persistence and truth-telling will eventually win out and bear the good fruit of justice. Truth is on our side; God is on the side of justice. "The arc of the moral universe is long," Martin Luther King Jr. said famously, "but it bends toward justice."¹

BLESSED ARE THE MERCIFUL

"Blessed are the merciful: they shall have mercy shown them." —Matthew 5:7

I believe with all my heart that mercy and forgiveness are the whole Gospel. The Benedictus (Luke 1:68-79) says we'll have knowledge of salvation through the forgiveness of sin (1:77). The experience of forgiveness or mercy is the experience of a magnanimous God who loves out of total gratuitousness. There's no tit-for-tat. Grace isn't for sale. That is the symbolism of Jesus kicking over the tables in the temple. One cannot buy God by worthiness, by achievement, by obeying commandments. Salvation is God's loving-kindness, a loving-kindness that is "forever". Read Psalm 136 for an ecstatic description of God's faithful mercy.

The mystery of forgiveness is God's ultimate entry into powerlessness. Withholding forgiveness is a form of power over another person, a way to manipulate, shame, control, and diminish another. God in Jesus refuses all such power.

If Jesus is the revelation of what's going on inside the eternal God (see Colossians 1:15), which is the core of the Christian faith, then we are forced to conclude that God is very humble. This God never seems to hold rightful claims against us. Abdicating what we thought was the proper role of God, this God "has thrust all our sins behind his back" (see Isaiah 38:17).

We do not attain anything by our own holiness but by ten thousand surrenders to mercy. A lifetime of received forgiveness allows us to become mercy: that's the Beatitude. We become what we receive, what we allow into our hearts. Mercy becomes our energy and purpose. Perhaps we are finally enlightened and free when we can both receive it and give it away—without payment or punishment.

BLESSED ARE THE PURE IN HEART

"Blessed are the pure in heart: they shall see God." —Matthew 5:8

When the heart is right, Jesus says, seeing will be right. He ties together heart and sight. Consider the saying, "Beauty is in the eyes of the beholder." So is God. All we need to do is keep the lens clean, the heart pure.

Cynthia Bourgeault describes the connection between the "heart" and the ability to see God as taught in the Wisdom tradition:

The heart in the ancient sacred traditions has a very specific and perhaps surprising meaning. It is not the seat of our personal affective life—or even, ultimately, of our personal identity—but an organ for the perception of divine purpose and beauty. It is our antenna, so to speak, given to us to orient us toward the divine radiance and to synchronize our being with its more subtle movements. The heart is not for personal expression but for divine perception. . . .

¹ John Dear, *The Beatitudes of Peace: Meditations on the Beatitudes, Peacemaking and the Spiritual Life* (Twenty-Third Publications: 2016), 61-62, 66, 69.

In the language of sacred tradition, the emotional centre [where the heart lies] carries the “reconciling” force. It serves as a bridge between the mind and the body and also between our usual physical world and this invisible other realm. When properly attuned, the emotional centre’s most striking capacity, lacking in the mind alone, is the ability to comprehend the language of paradox. Logical inconsistencies that the mind must reduce into a simple “either-or” can be held by the heart in “both-and”—and even more important, felt that way—without needing to resolve, close down, or protect oneself from the pain that ambiguity always brings.²

BLESSED ARE THE PEACEMAKERS

“Blessed are the peacemakers: they shall be recognised as children of God.” —Matthew 5:9

In Jesus’ teaching and in his life, we see modelled nonviolent, peaceful action. He encourages us to likewise “turn the other cheek” and not return vengeance with vengeance. There is no way to peace other than through peace-making itself. But many think we can achieve peace through violence. We say, “We will stop killing by killing.” Sadly, that is the way we think, and it is in opposition to all great religious teachers. Our need for immediate control leads us to disconnect the clear unity between means and ends.

War is a means of seeking control, not a means of seeking peace. Violence, you see, will always create more violence. It is not real peace. As Pope Paul VI reflected, “If you want peace, work for justice.”

John Dear, an internationally known voice for peace and nonviolence, says that as Christians, “We cannot support war, participate in war, pay for war, promote war, or wage war.” It is our responsibility to work to “end war and create peace . . . to be a peacemaker.”³

How can we be peacemakers? It begins by being peace ourselves, by connecting with the source of peace within. It means standing up in nonviolent resistance to systems of injustice. It involves learning the skills of nonviolent communication and conflict resolution.

Children of God

We have grasped the mystery of the atom and rejected the Sermon on the Mount. . . . Ours is a world of nuclear giants and ethical infants. We know more about war than we know about peace, more about killing than we know about living. — General Omar Bradley⁴.

The Pax Romana creates a false peace by sacrificing others. But the peace Jesus speaks of—Pax Christi, the peace of Christ—waits and works for true peace by sacrificing the false self of power, prestige, and possessions. Such peace-making will never be popular. The follower of Jesus is doomed to minority status.

Jesus next warns us that we will be hated from all sides (see also John 15:18-16:2 and Matthew 10:22). When you’re working outside the system, when you work for peace, you will not be admired inside the system. In fact, you will look dangerous, subversive, and unpatriotic. One thing you cannot call Jesus was a patriot. He was serving a far bigger realm.

If you are truly a peacemaker, your very means have to be nonviolent and you have to be consistently pro-life—from womb to tomb. One of the most distressing qualities of many Christians today is that they retain the right to decide when, where, and with whom they will be pro-life peacemakers. If the other can be determined to be wrong, guilty, unworthy, or sinful, the death penalty is somehow supposed to serve justice. That entirely misses the ethical point Jesus makes: We are never the sole arbiters of life or death, because life is created by God and carries the divine image. It is a spiritual seeing, far beyond any ideology of left or right.

² Cynthia Bourgeault, *The Wisdom Way of Knowing: Reclaiming an Ancient Tradition to Awaken the Heart* (Jossey-Bass: 2003), 33-35.

³ John Dear, *The Beatitudes of Peace: Meditations on the Beatitudes* (Twenty-Third Publications: 2016), 89-90.

⁴ Omar Bradley, *Armistice Day Address in Boston on November 10, 1948*. From *The Collected Writings of General Omar N. Bradley*, vol. 1 (U.S. Government Printing: 1967), 588-589.

BLESSED ARE THE PERSECUTED

“Blessed are those who are persecuted in the cause of justice: the kingdom of Heaven is theirs.” —Matthew 5:10

*I guess we should not be surprised that this Beatitude follows the previous ones. The first and last Beatitudes are present tense: *Theirs is the kingdom of Heaven.* Until this statement, Jesus has said “happy are the . . .,” speaking generally. Now he says happy are “those of you. . . .” Very likely Matthew is conveying that this scene is happening directly in front of Jesus. His small community is being persecuted, and Jesus tells them to “rejoice and be glad”! Persecution for the cause of justice is inevitable. Instead of seeking to blame someone for their well-earned scars, he is telling them two clear things: You can be happy—and you can be happy now!*

Matthew 5:11-12 could really be called the ninth Beatitude, although it more likely is an explanation of the eighth: Blessed are you when people abuse you and persecute you and speak all kinds of things against you falsely on my account. Rejoice and be glad, for your reward will be great in heaven; this is how they persecuted the prophets before you.

The disciples’ response is a prophetic action itself. To live joyfully amid misunderstanding and slander points beyond “my kingdom” to the Kingdom of God. Goodness can never be attacked directly; the messengers or the motivation must be discredited.

Luke’s Gospel presents the same message in the opposite form: “Alas for you when the world speaks well of you! This was the way their ancestors treated the false prophets” (Luke 6:26). Too much praise is probably an indication that it is not the full Gospel. In either case, Jesus himself clearly knew that his teaching would turn conventional values on their head.

“Bad” people didn’t kill Jesus; conventional wisdom crucified him. Jesus taught an alternative wisdom instead of the maintenance of social order. Prophets and wisdom teachers like Jesus have passed through a major death to their ego. This is the core meaning of transformation. Yet most of Christian history tried to understand Jesus inside the earlier stage of law and order. Jesus’ Sermon on the Mount is anything but maintaining the status quo!

Theologian Marcus Borg (1942-2015) wrote:

“The gospel of Jesus—the good news of Jesus’ own message—is that there is a way of being that moves beyond both secular and religious conventional wisdom. The path of transformation of which Jesus spoke leads from a life of requirements and measuring up (whether to culture or to God) to a life of relationship with God. It leads from a life of anxiety to a life of peace and trust. It leads from the bondage of self-preoccupation to the freedom of self-forgetfulness. It leads from life centred in culture to life centred in God.”⁵

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⁵ Marcus J. Borg, *Meeting Jesus Again for the First Time: The Historical Jesus and the Heart of Contemporary Faith* (HarperSanFrancisco: 1994), 88.