

## Matthew 4:23-5:4

New Revised Standard Version (NRSV)

<sup>23</sup> Jesus went throughout Galilee, teaching in their synagogues and proclaiming the good news of the kingdom and curing every disease and every sickness among the people. <sup>24</sup> So his fame spread throughout all Syria, and they brought to him all the sick, those who were afflicted with various diseases and pains, demoniacs, epileptics, and paralytics, and he cured them. <sup>25</sup> And great crowds followed him from Galilee, the Decapolis, Jerusalem, Judea, and from beyond the Jordan.

<sup>5</sup> When Jesus saw *the crowds*, he went *up the mountain*; and after he sat down, his disciples came to him. <sup>2</sup> Then Jesus began to speak, and taught them, saying:

<sup>3</sup> **"BLESSED** are the *poor in spirit*, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven.

<sup>4</sup> **"BLESSED** are those who *mourn*, for they will be *comforted*.

## Isaiah 61:1-4,8, 10-11

New Revised Standard Version (NRSV)

<sup>1</sup>The spirit of the Lord God is upon me, because the Lord has anointed me; he has sent me to bring good news to the oppressed, to bind up the brokenhearted, to proclaim liberty to the captives,

The Beatitudes (Matthew 5:1-12) are identified as the essential teaching of Jesus. Recorded in Matthew, within the larger section of the Sermon on the Mount (Matthew 5-7) they have been taken seriously from literal to metaphorical, from concrete pragmatic directives to poetic unrealistic hopes of how heaven is. They include a tension between now, and what is to come, as each beatitude contains the first verb in the present tense, with a dependent clause articulated in the future tense. The first group of 4 beatitudes (5:3-6) is made up of 36 words (in the original Greek) closing with a reference to righteousness as does the second group (5:7-10), they are bound together with a strong literary influence from Isaiah 61 and the alliteration of the letter p (or π in Greek).

*the crowds*. While the crowd seems like a faceless mass, the text implies that it's made up of all those we've heard about suffering from illness, disease and social rejection in Matthew 5:23-24.

*up the mountain*: Mountains were sacred place, a sort of throne room of God/the gods in the ancient world for both the pagans Greeks-Romans (think of Mt Olympus as the home of the gods) and for the Hebrews. Remember that Moses went up the *mountain* to receive the 10 commandments, both he and Elijah went up the *mountain* to "see" God; Isaiah talks of the coming reign of God as a meal on *the mountain top*. Isaiah 2:2.

*he sat down*: it was common in the ancient world to do the opposite of we do – the teacher sat while the students stood. It also implies the sitting down of Jesus upon a throne from which he teaches, leads, judges, rules his kingdom.

**BLESSED**: in Greek – μακάριος; pronounced [MAKARIOS]: most often translated at "blessed," "fortunate," or "happy." In the Ancient World could also mean "wealthy," seeming to be tied to a notion of blessing related to material well-being, given by the gods. Here then Jesus seems to be saying something radically diverging from the established social-religious notion of blessing as possessing lots or good things.

**mourn**:: The word here [penthountes] point to the impossible to hide grieving at the death, or separation from someone: widows, parents, exiles, the oppressed, enslaved, those afflicted by misfortune. The kind of mourning referred to here is not so much mere sadness or weeping but prayers of lament over the hurt in the world. Such lament grows out of an awareness of the difference between the world as it is and the world as God will it to be.

*comforted*:: the word [parakaleo] means 1) to call, 2) to beseech, 3) to exhort, 4) to comfort. It's related to prayer and the asking of help through which comfort and consolation is given. The Greeks and Romans generally thought of mourning and consolation as useless, something done by the uneducated and unthoughtful. The wise simply accept their lot in life. Jesus on the contrary promises that oppression and mourning are not the final words.

and release to the prisoners;  
<sup>2</sup> to proclaim the year of the Lord's favor,  
 and the day of vengeance of our God;  
 to comfort all who mourn;  
<sup>3</sup> to provide for those who mourn in Zion—  
 to give them a garland instead of ashes,  
 the oil of gladness instead of mourning,  
 the mantle of praise instead of a faint spirit.  
 They will be called oaks of righteousness,  
 the planting of the Lord, to display his glory.  
<sup>4</sup> They shall build up the ancient ruins,  
 they shall raise up the former devastations;  
 they shall repair the ruined cities,  
 the devastations of many generations.

<sup>8</sup> For I the Lord love justice,  
 I hate robbery and wrongdoing;

<sup>10</sup> I will greatly rejoice in the Lord,  
 my whole being shall exult in my God;  
 for he has clothed me with the garments of  
 salvation,  
 he has covered me with the robe of  
 righteousness,  
 as a bridegroom decks himself with a garland,  
 and as a bride adorns herself with her jewels.  
<sup>11</sup> For as the earth brings forth its shoots,  
 and as a garden causes what is sown in it to  
 spring up,  
 so the Lord God will cause righteousness and praise  
 to spring up before all the nations.

### Questions for the practice of Examen & Contemplation

- What grabs your attention in this reading?
- How, when, have you experienced mourning or lament over the way in which the world is?
- Does our world/society/culture look at the world more in tune with what Jesus said or the vision of the Greek cynics?
- How do you struggle to trust that God will have the final word, not oppression and mourning?
- Where do you glimpse God's consolation already at work in the world?

Isaiah was prophet during the time of the exile of the Jewish people to Babylon, captive of a foreign power, when all things seem lost, when the God of Abraham seems impotent to deliver the people, the prophet speaks radical words of hope, pointing to a reversal of the way in which the world appears. Jesus quotes this scripture in his first public sermon in his hometown of Nazareth (recounted in Luke 4:14-30). Jesus continues and develops this word of radical life-affirming hope in Adonai, adding the twist that such world-transforming hope is realized in him. (which ends up being too much for his Nazareth neighbors to handle).

Such hope is a radical departure from and reaction against the cynical hopelessness that characterized the Roman World of his day, which was rooted in Greek culture and philosophical thought. Here are some examples of that:

#### **INTERSECTIONS BETWEEN TODAY'S SCRIPTURE AND COMMON PHILOSOPHICAL THOUGHT AT THE TIME OF JESUS IN THE ROMAN EMPIRE ROOTED IN GREEK CULTURE.**

**Julian was Roman Emperor from 361 to 363, as well as a notable philosopher and author in Greek.**

"Everything is transitory. All mourning is foolish and useless."

**Theognis of Megara was a Greek lyric poet active in the sixth century BC.**

"Best of all for mortals is never to have been born, but for those who have been born to die as soon as possible."

**Crantor was a Greek philosopher, probably born around the middle of the 4th century BC. His writing are preserved by Plutarch in the 1st century of our era.**

"Many wise men regard life as a punishment, and the birth of man as his greatest misfortune."

**How is the word of Jesus different than Greek philosophy? Which is more dominant in our society & culture today?**