

BLESSED ARE THE MEEK

Meekness. What does it mean to be meek? It is not a quality often extolled in our twenty-first century culture. In the Sermon on the Mount, the third in the list of the Beatitudes in Matthew's Gospel is meekness. Jesus declares, "Blessed are the meek for they shall inherit the earth" (Mt 5:5). Do we expect such an outcome for the meek? The media give daily reports of the violent who advance to take land, not their own, by force of arms.

Jesus draws our attention in words that seem to contradict the ordinary understanding of what takes place in our human drama. The paradox of His discourse startles us as we weigh the seeming opposites. The meek will be the ones who gain? He is echoing Psalm 37. "The meek shall possess the land. They shall delight in abounding peace" (11).

The word for *blessed* can also be translated as "Happy is the one who..." The formula is evident in the psalms and in the wisdom literature of the Hebrew Bible. Both Matthew and Luke describe Jesus' sermon incorporating the beatitudes, but there is a difference. Matthew's eight, as compared to Luke's four, are raised to an especially spiritual level. Emphasis is placed on virtue and the action that flows from goodness.

The name Matthew means "gift of the Lord." The evangelist is called Levi in the account we find in Mark and Luke. Belonging to the despised class of tax collectors, he would be something of a social outcast--seen as an agent of the thoroughly disliked Roman government. Jesus did not make choices that seem sensible for someone who wants to convey a revolutionary message. "Afterward He went out and saw a tax collector named Levi sitting at his customs post. He said to him, 'Follow me.'"

The protagonists in this incident act in wholly unexpected ways. Why would a preacher take someone from a despised level of society, a wholly unpolitical choice? On the other hand, why would Levi depart from the wealth he is accumulating at his official post? "Leaving everything behind, Levi stood up and became His follower" (Lk 5:27,28). Meekness would not be a quality associated with the rapacious professional class Matthew belonged to. Jesus encounters us where we are and often upsets the arrangement we have made for our lives. He calls us to embrace virtues we had not wanted to give our attention to.

"Blessed are the meek." In English, the word *meek* derives from the Anglo-Saxon and carries an aspect of timidity. Actually, the Greek word used by Matthew is meant to convey gentleness, humility, a level of courtesy and considerateness in dealing with others. It does not signify a kind of cowardly or submissive surrender.

We live in a competitive world. We are encouraged to forge ahead even at the cost of wounded relationships. Jesus has a very different message. "Learn from Me for I am meek and humble of heart." And where will His lesson lead us? "Your souls will find rest." (Mt 11:29). The heart of Jesus wants to help us establish our own

hearts in a peace that surpasses human understanding. We don't give up responsibility to improve the circumstances in which we find ourselves. No, we forge ahead with energy. But the meekness which Christ urges would keep power under control. "Speak gently and respectfully," the First Epistle of Peter advises us (3:16).

Anger is easily aroused when we are disappointed in the outcome of events. Sometimes we too readily find a target for our rage by blaming other people. Then we give up what Jesus has promised. We do not inherit the *land* of Matthew's beatitude. Instead we lose territory as anger grounds us in the boundaries of a self-centered certitude. Alas, blessedness has given way to an unhappy isolation we have brought upon ourselves.

Peter's epistle tells us to leave this imprisonment holding us captive in such a small space. "Be like-minded, sympathetic, loving toward one another, kindly disposed and humble. Do not return insult for insult. Return a blessing instead" (1Pt 3: 8,9).

The meekness Christ helps us develop, results in a calm appraisal of events. We weigh them carefully and see where a gentle spirit might bring about some degree of improvement for everyone involved. Injustice is not condoned; we struggle to help the oppressed. That is how we spread the blessedness Jesus gives us as our inheritance. "May the Lord bless you more and more. May you be blessed by the Lord Who made heaven and earth" (Ps 115:14, 15).

Sister Margaret Dorgan, DCM