

MATTHEW 5:3
UPSIDE-DOWN VALUES

The values debate - what kind of Scotland do we want? It has become part of the referendum debate, but in fact it is a different debate! This is a debate that has been going on for years and will go on long after September 19th. What kind of Scotland do we want? Here's the thing: the answer to that question is tied to another: What kind of people do we want to be? Culture, society is not some strange phenomenon that appears out of nowhere; culture and society is what we make them to be. Scotland will be the kind of nation when we decide what kind of people we want to be! So what kind of people do we want to be? That's a much more personal question and so it is a lot harder to debate and discuss, simply because it is personal. But the answer to that question shapes so many other parts of life: it shapes the way we think about work, about money, about family and friends; it shapes the way in which we think about ourselves, our sense of self-esteem; it even shapes the way we think about church, faith and God.

What shapes our values? A huge number of influences are at work to shape our values, some we know and embrace deliberately; others are at work when we're not even looking! Books, magazines, the newspapers we read; TV programmes, the films we watch in the cinema, the theatre we go to see; the music we listen to. People we know shape our values; our family, spouse, children, parents, in-laws; our friends; peer influence is strong, what other people think and say. Politicians shape our values, be they conservative, labour, liberal, nationalist; leaders in our line of work, work colleagues, employees, bosses, the professions. Our teachers shape our values, from school, university, college. Our religious background: church, no church; is the church liberal, radical, conservative, high church, low church; did we do RE at school; were we growing up in other religious backgrounds, or as an atheist. All of these shape the way we look at the world, our values, the things we see as important. There is one missing for the Christian: Jesus! How does Jesus shape our view of the world? How does Jesus shape our sense of values? Is Jesus able to get through that morass of other influences? Or do we just pic'n'mix views and values from all sorts of places and Jesus gets lost in melee?

Jesus' values are very different! The Beatitudes are a wonderful, challenging set of sayings that reveal Jesus' values; these are values that He wants to see in His disciples, values that change the world and turn the world upside-down; Christian counter-culture is expressed here. Our values are shaped by so much of the culture around us, more than we know; here's a counter-culture from Jesus. The Beatitudes is a group of eight sayings that describe the disciple: these are eight values for one group of people; they are not eight groups of people; these are values that the disciple of Jesus should live by and hold on to. We'll see over the next few weeks just how these hang together to shape and form the disciple into someone more and more like Jesus. They all come in the same form: "*Blessed are...*" (*Matthew 5:3*); some versions use the word 'happy' but this is not about being happy; this is about something much bigger than our emotions; this is about the blessing of God and being a people who are blessed by God; a quality is described and then a way in which God blesses us. This is about our ultimate well-being and the blessing of God on our lives.

"Blessed are..." (Matthew 5:3) This is the first quality that Jesus teaches for the disciple, being poor in spirit. This is all about the way in which we see ourselves. This is about coming to God with empty hands, having nothing in ourselves of which we might boast, but knowing that our need of God is strong and deep. Here's a contrast: who are the 'blessed' people in the eyes of the world, the people who are held up for

us to admire, even idolise? By and large these are the rich people, people who have everything, who can buy and sell, who admit to need nothing and if they do need something they can buy it. Alongside that, these are people who are self-reliant, self-confident and have a conceit of themselves, proud of their achievements and proud of what they have; they see themselves as rich in most ways and being in need is not something to admit to. But here's a thing: rich people can still be poor in spirit; rich people can still get to the point where their wealth doesn't give them peace of mind, doesn't make them happy, but leaves them still feeling empty inside, with no sense of peace or hope.

Let me give you an example of someone 'poor in spirit'. We read Luke chapter 5, Jesus calling people to be His disciples. He's sitting in Peter's boat, teaching the crowd on the shore; teaching them the word of God. Then, when He's done, He tells Peter to go out onto the lake to catch fish. Peter's been out all night and caught nothing, but because its Jesus he goes out again and of course they catch more fish than they've seen for a long time. This is an amazing act of grace and power from Jesus. Peter's reaction: *"When Simon Peter..." (Luke 5:8)* His first reaction is to see himself in the light of Jesus' presence and that is to see how weak and poor he is. He becomes aware of his sin; he is not worthy to breathe the same air as this special person standing in front of him on his own boat. Peter, poor in spirit, his instinct is to ask Jesus to leave, go away, because Peter knows that he doesn't belong with Jesus. Does Jesus go away? No, of course, not. Instead He invites Peter to join him in the adventure of a lifetime, as a disciple, as a mission-person, to share in the kingdom and to tell others.

Moses when God meets him in the burning bush: *"Who am I that I should go to Pharaoh?" (Exodus 3:11)* Gideon when he was about to overturn some of the biggest fighting odds ever: *"how can I save Israel? My clan is the weakest in Manasseh and I am the least in my family."* (Judges 6:15) David, about to leave a legacy for his son in building the temple: *"Who am I, O Lord God, and what is my family, that you have brought me thus far?" (1 Chronicles 17:16)* Three men, all heroes of the faith in the Old Testament, and all of them have a real sense of being poor in spirit. They have nothing to bring to God, nothing to boast about, nothing in themselves to depend on, but they see themselves as needing to rely totally on God for His blessing.

Now there are at least two ways to take this, one is good and healthy and the other is not! Let's turn them round. We can take this as a way of telling people that they are rubbish, or useless; it could be seen as a way of treading people down. There are people around who are told exactly that and when you're told something often enough you begin to believe that you are rubbish, or useless, or are nothing and have such a poor sense of themselves. The Church and religion has played its part in that kind of process; there was a time in Scotland when people were told from pulpits that they were miserable sinners and had nothing to offer God and this became a way of those who had religious power controlling people and keeping them down. It is only part of the story. A similar process is repeated in Muslim countries today with women: they have no voice, they are nothing. This is simply awful! Please don't think that this is what Jesus is advocating.

The other way to take this is much better, even liberating. This creates space for grace! *"Blessed are..." (Matthew 5:3)* In every example we've quoted today of the people who questioned God, saying "Who am I?" - in every case, they went on to achieve great things for God. Why? Because God took these people and blessed them with His grace. He didn't tell them they were wrong in their attitude to themselves; in every case, He knew that their self-understanding was spot on; but in every case their attitudes to themselves created space for grace. God's grace came

into that situation and transformed it, came into that person's life and changed them, turned them upside down, so that far from being useless and having nothing, these people lived their lives by faith and God blessed them hugely and mightily.

A friend of mine once asked me if I'd ever listed my achievements in ministry. Hmm! Not something we do! We're Presbyterian! It is dangerous because either we have no achievements in which case this becomes a reason to despair, or we do have a list of them and that becomes a reason to boast and be proud. However, I did make a list and it was interesting to do that and to notice the ways in which God has been at work in my life and through my ministry. But if you scratch me, I bleed the words of David that I quoted earlier: *"Who am I, O Lord God, that you have brought me thus far?"* I know that everything that I have achieved has been down to the grace of God at work in me and through me; the glory goes to God. It is right to acknowledge and celebrate our achievements in life, but it is also right to acknowledge that we are what and who we are by the grace of God. It is hugely liberating when we work that out, because we no longer need to prove ourselves to anyone, not even to God. We can come to God, knowing our weaknesses, our frailties, having a sense of need and ready to depend totally on God and His grace; we are poor in spirit, yet blessed because that attitude to ourselves creates space for grace.

"Theirs is..." (Matthew 5:3b) Poor = nothing; that's way the world thinks. Poor = nothing materially, nothing to bring to the table, no voice; hearing the word "poor" means pictures of people living in slums in Sierra Leone, or living on the streets of Edinburgh, or living in shacks in Cambodia. According to Jesus, "poor in spirit" = people greatly blessed. "Kingdom" is a big theme for Matthew: he records so much of Jesus' teaching as being about the Kingdom. The "poor in spirit" are the heirs of God's kingdom and one day will share in His glory. This not something that we earn, but this is promise of Jesus in His grace. This is who we are, a people greatly blessed by God, not because we've earned it by being good, but because He is gracious to us and loves us and showers this blessing on us in His grace. We will share in Jesus' glory; we will live in the presence of God; we will inherit this kingdom because Jesus has promised it to us. Till then, we are the people whom God blesses in all sorts of other ways, as we shall see in next few weeks.

Values that are turned upside down! Create space for grace! How do you see yourself? We're told by the magazines that we're wrong size, the wrong shape, that need to be extrovert and self-confident and when we're none of these things, well then "how great a failure are you!!" This is a recipe for disaster and despair. But here are two things: first of all, recognise that we come with empty hands; secondly, see that this creates space for grace and we are who we are by the grace of God. There is a sense of need; not everything is perfect, but there is grace, God does love and care for us; we are a people greatly blessed. It starts with a sense of need; it starts with complete dependence on God: *"Who am I, O Lord God, that you have brought me thus far?"* "Nothing in my hand I bring, simply to thy cross I cling" (Toplady) If we stop halfway through that line of the hymn, we end up with nothing; but when we get to the end of it, it becomes a quality that creates the space for grace. So being poor in spirit becomes a quality to seek after: being poor in spirit, we say "I depend totally on Jesus" and that creates space for Him to make us new people and to bless us with riches beyond measure.