

1

LIVING WITH GENUINE HUMILITY

Blessed are the poor in spirit, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven.

MATTHEW 5:3

The happiest people on earth

Who are the happiest people in the world? That is a question posed by the United Nations 'World Happiness Report' (March 2017),¹⁴ following the first report published in April 2012. It aims to 'redefine the growth narrative to put people's well-being at the centre of governments' efforts'. The main six factors found to support happiness, it suggests, are: income, social support, health and life expectancy, freedom to make life choices, generosity and good governance (freedom from corruption). By these measurements, the report tells us, Finland was in first place in 2018, followed by Norway, Denmark, Iceland and Switzerland. The US has slipped to 18th place, five places down from 2016. The UK comes in 19th place (behind Germany, Canada and Australia) and many countries in Africa frequently appear towards the end of the list. In richer countries, the internal differences are not mainly explained by income inequality, but by differences in mental health, physical health and personal relationships. In poorer countries, income differences matter more, but, even there, mental illness is a major source of misery. Work is also a major factor affecting happiness. Unemployment causes a

major fall in happiness, and even for those in work the quality of work can cause major variations in happiness.

These six criteria really matter and make a vast difference to people's lives; certainly, governments should be working at all of them. But each of them is founded on a set of values that are formed by a worldview, a set of beliefs about who we are, why the world exists and why it matters to be living happy and contented lives. Jesus would say that that worldview must have God at the centre of it, because he is the creator and sustainer of all life: 'In him we live and move and have our being' (Acts 17:28). So happiness – according to Jesus – flows from a worldview that has God at the centre. That is why each of the beatitudes begins with the exclamation 'Happy' or 'Blessed' – this is the deepest definition of happiness the world will ever know. This is the kind of life that brings true joy and from which flows a quality of life marked by these important criteria. This is what John Newton (1725–1807) expresses in that famous hymn, 'Glorious things of thee are spoken':

*Solid joys and lasting treasure,
None but Zion's children know.*¹⁵

Zion's children are people who have put God at the centre of their lives. They are happy and blessed in the ways that the beatitudes will describe. And the invitation is open to anyone: the sermon on the mount begins with Jesus teaching the disciples, but finishes with a large crowd listening in, amazed at his teaching. We too are invited to listen and learn to live in this way.

Poor in spirit

Let's be honest: we all love a bit of celebrity culture! It is incredibly hard to resist those alluring magazines at the hairdresser or the doctor's surgery, inviting us to nose around in the lives of the rich and famous.

There is a positive side to it all. Firstly, celebrity culture is mainly good for those who are being profiled because it gives them the status and publicity that usually help their careers and lifestyles. I say 'mainly good' because there is the downside of the paparazzi and public scrutiny, but that is the cost that comes with the fame. Secondly, it is good for the media industry because it is guaranteed to sell newspapers and magazines in their millions and attracts large audiences for TV chat shows. Thirdly, because celebrities are usually very successful in their professional and public life, by putting themselves 'out there' and becoming household names, they make us genuinely intrigued to know all about their personal lives as well: how are their relationships going, where did they go on holiday, who has had plastic surgery and what did they wear on their big night out at the Oscars? Fourthly, celebrities do a lot to promote good causes and support charitable initiatives – look at the phenomenal success of 'Band Aid' and 'Children in Need'.

There is, however, a darker, more worrying, downside to celebrity culture. It tends to divide the human race into two kinds of people: the famous and successful on the one hand, and the normal and mundane on the other, leaving most of the human race feeling insignificant, undervalued and unimportant. It encourages a voyeuristic curiosity and envy, causing us to aspire unrealistically to their luxurious lifestyles and vast fortunes. It allows some people to be fabulously wealthy when others have no food or home or access to healthcare. It leans towards an amoral assessment of human behaviour: because they are talented and famous, we make allowances for their excesses because that's what people like them do in their sphere of life owing to the pressures they are under. Worst of all, it feeds an overinflated view of their own importance, encouraging pride, superiority and misplaced self-satisfaction.

All of this seems a million miles from the first beatitude. The 'poor in spirit' are those who know the poverty of their own lives and their need of God to heal, forgive and restore. Davies and Allison explain the meaning like this:

In the Old Testament, especially in the Psalms, the Greek word and its Hebrew equivalents refer to those who are in special need of God's help... and in time 'poor' came to be a self-designation for the meek, humiliated and oppressed people of God.¹⁶

They have no delusions of grandeur, no pretensions to holiness, no inflated estimations of their own importance. Instead, they are desperately in need of God's saving help. They are not standing on an arrogant and misplaced self-confidence; instead, they are calling out to God for mercy and grace.

Jesus is also deliberately alluding to the great messianic prophecy in Isaiah 61:1: 'The Spirit of the Sovereign Lord is on me, because the Lord has anointed me to proclaim good news to the poor.' The 'poor in spirit' were, originally, the Jewish exiles suffering hardship and poverty in exile in Babylon. They had lost everything because of their own sin and disobedience to the requirements of the covenant: their land, their city, their temple, their status as the people of God, even their trust and confidence that God loved them and could rescue them. They were desperate, throwing themselves on the mercy and grace of God for help. So Jesus, by a deliberate reference to Isaiah 61:1, is declaring that this promise of salvation and blessing is now being fulfilled in an even more wonderful way. These people will know the restoration of their fortunes: 'for theirs is the kingdom of heaven' (Matthew 5:3).

In short, these people who are blessed have a humble spirit: they say with Isaiah: 'Woe to me... I am ruined! For I am a man of unclean lips, and I live among a people of unclean lips' (Isaiah 6:5). They pray with King David, after his adultery with Bathsheba and his murder of her husband, Uriah: 'For I know my transgressions, and my sin is always before me. Against you, you only, have I sinned and done what is evil in your sight' (Psalm 51:3-4). They say with the centurion, whose servant is desperately ill: 'Lord, I do not deserve to have you come under my roof. But just say the word, and my servant will be healed'

(Matthew 8:8). They exclaim with Peter, following Jesus' miraculous catch of fish: 'Go away from me, Lord; I am a sinful man' (Luke 5:8). They call out with blind Bartimaeus, sitting by the roadside, begging: 'Jesus, Son of David, have mercy on me!' (Mark 10:47). They say with Paul: 'Christ Jesus came into the world to save sinners - of whom I am the worst' (1 Timothy 1:15).

Jesus illustrated this spiritual poverty in the parable of the Pharisee and the tax collector (Luke 18:9-14). Two men went to the temple to pray. The Pharisee spent his time telling God how dutiful he had been in all his spiritual observances. The tax collector could not lift up his eyes to heaven, but beat his breast and said: 'God, have mercy on me, a sinner.' He was the one who went home justified, in a right relationship with God. He was poor in spirit, and the kingdom of heaven belonged to him.

This spiritual poverty is also seen in the parable of the lost son (Luke 15:11-31). The younger brother takes his share of the family inheritance and goes off to a far country, where he squanders it all on wild living. Poverty and hardship drive him back to his father's home: 'Father, I have sinned against heaven and against you. I am no longer worthy to be called your son; make me like one of your hired servants' (vv. 18-19). He has messed up big time and reached the end of his own resources. In his sheer desperation, he throws himself on the mercy and grace of his ever-loving father, and receives the most surprising and moving welcome:

The father said to his servants, 'Quick! Bring the best robe and put it on him. Put a ring on his finger and sandals on his feet. Bring the fattened calf and kill it. Let's have a feast and celebrate. For this son of mine was dead and is alive again; he was lost and is found.' So they began to celebrate.

LUKE 15:22-24

The poor in spirit are indeed blessed, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven.

Honesty and humility

The first beatitude, therefore, requires honesty and humility from us. Honesty is needed because it is not easy to admit that we are messed up and that we are fully responsible. More than that, we are caught in a trap that we can't escape from. We have reached the end of our resources and there appears to be no hope. This desperation is expressed in many hymns and prayers of God's people down the centuries, but perhaps nowhere more honestly and starkly than in 'Rock of Ages' by Revd Augustus Toplady (1740-78):

*Nothing in my hand I bring,
simply to thy cross I cling;
naked, come to thee for dress;
helpless, look to thee for grace;
foul, I to the fountain fly;
wash me, Saviour, or I die!*¹⁷

What honesty to see ourselves as empty-handed, clinging on to the cross, naked, helpless, foul and soiled by our sin! This is what it means to be 'poor in spirit'. This does not deny that we are made in the image of God and therefore we are possessed of creativity and intelligence, of a capability for kindness and an ability to love. Nor does it deny the truth that we are infinitely precious in God's sight and known and loved by him to the very core of our being - for that is why he sent his Son to be our Saviour (John 3:16). But it is to be realistic and honest about the ways we have wounded that love and marred his image in us, as the Church of England prays in one of its prayers of confession.

Humility is the other requirement of the 'poor in spirit': there are no grounds for pride or arrogance for those who have to go, cap in hand, and ask for help. At university, I prided myself on being a fit and healthy young man who was used to getting a knock or two on the sports field. So when I got a squash ball hit into my eye during play, I shrugged it off as a black eye. A friend advised me to get it checked,

so I reluctantly went up to the eye hospital. There they diagnosed a very serious eye injury that even threatened my sight, and I had to spend a week in hospital lying very still to allow it to recover. It was a humbling experience, but I am so glad I swallowed my pride and asked for help.

The 'poor in spirit' have done the same: they have swallowed their pride, admitted they need help and gone to find it from the healer of our souls, Jesus Christ. They have owned up to their sin, acknowledged their guilt and taken hold of the forgiveness that Christ has won on the cross. And because we continually stumble and fall, this becomes a lifelong attitude of mind: we return to the cross again and again in personal and public confession. Honesty admits we need help; humility enables us to go and find it.

I knew a man who told me that he never apologised to anyone about anything. The reason for this, he said, was that he was very intentional in everything he said and did, and took responsibility for his words and actions. He had no regrets and it would injure his pride and make him look small if he were to admit he had made a mistake and have to apologise. To a lesser extent, politicians fall into this way of thinking: they sometimes find it hard to admit that they made a mistake or said something wrong because it would be an admission of failure and so let their party down. Yet I believe the first beatitude allows us to admit our mistakes, own our failures and have the humility and courage to apologise and find forgiveness. I think the world needs people with honest humility, following the example of Jesus, who 'made himself nothing by taking the very nature of a servant... He humbled himself by becoming obedient to death – even death on a cross' (Philippians 2:7–8).

At Wimbledon in 2017, a new British star, Johanna Konta, was born in the hearts of the public, following a victory that won her a place in the Ladies Singles semi-finals against the legendary Venus Williams, an achievement that had not been seen on Centre Court for almost 40 years. Only two years earlier, she was labouring outside the top

150 seeds. 'Talented, dedicated, and growing fast into a national icon' was the headline in *The Times*. Yet she displayed a remarkable degree of humility for one who might, one day, become a Wimbledon champion. As she was leaving the court to the roar of the crowd, she stopped and made time to pose for a selfie requested by a Chelsea Pensioner. *The Times* said that he had grabbed 'the ultimate post-match selfie'. And in the interview afterwards, Konta said: 'in terms of the home support I feel very excited and very humbled by it!'¹⁸

If someone who is on the edge of stardom can display this level of genuine humility, how much more should those who profess to be followers of Christ? 'What does the Lord require of you? To act justly and to love mercy and to walk humbly with your God' (Micah 6:8).

Personal reflection¹⁹

Blessed are the poor in spirit, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven

- Am I poor in spirit, poor within, having abandoned everything to God?
- Am I free and detached from earthly goods?
- What does money mean to me?
- Do I seek to lead a sober and simple life that is fitting for someone who wants to bear witness to the gospel?
- Do I take to heart the problem of the terrible poverty that is not chosen by but imposed on so many millions of my brothers and sisters?

Prayerful response

Use Mary's song of praise (the Magnificat) as she is humbled and honoured to be the mother of the Messiah (Luke 1:46–55):

My soul glorifies the Lord

and my spirit rejoices in God my Saviour,
for he has been mindful

of the humble state of his servant.

From now on all generations will call me blessed,
for the Mighty One has done great things for me -

holy is his name.

His mercy extends to those who fear him,
from generation to generation.

He has performed mighty deeds with his arm;
he has scattered those who are proud in their inmost
thoughts.

He has brought down rulers from their thrones
but has lifted up the humble.

He has filled the hungry with good things
but has sent the rich away empty.

He has helped his servant Israel,
remembering to be merciful

to Abraham and his descendants for ever,
just as he promised our ancestors.

You could pray the following prayer:

Glory to the Father, and to the Son, and to the Holy Spirit, as it
was in the beginning, is now, and will be for ever. Amen

Discussion questions for small groups

Poor in Spirit

Starter (15 mins)

- Do you get dazzled by celebrity culture?
- What does contemporary society think will make people really happy and contented?
- How much of this would Christians agree with?

Main course (60 mins)

- Put into your own words what Jesus meant by this opening beatitude.
- What kinds of people in the gospels illustrate this attitude of desperation for God's help?
- Describe a time when you have been desperate for God, and how he responded to your cries for help.
- Why is this attitude so countercultural in today's world?
- What is so attractive about people who are honest about their weaknesses and shortcomings, and are humble towards others?
- Who do you know who exemplifies this honesty and humility today?
- What steps could you take to 'humble yourself... under God's mighty hand' (1 Peter 5:6)?

Dessert (15 mins)

- Spend some time in open prayer, humbling yourselves before God.
- Let the Holy Spirit convict you of pride and arrogance, hardness of heart and an independent self-reliance.
- Silently confess any sins that are on your conscience, asking for God's forgiveness.
- Realise that we deserve nothing, but we are who we are because of God's grace and mercy.