

“The Ethos of Blessedness”

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¹⁷[Jesus] came down with them and stood on a level place, with a great crowd of his disciples and a great multitude of people from all Judea, Jerusalem, and the coast of Tyre and Sidon. ¹⁸They had come to hear him and to be healed of their diseases; and those who were troubled with unclean spirits were cured. ¹⁹And all in the crowd were trying to touch him, for power came out from him and healed all of them.

²⁰Then he looked up at his disciples and said: “Blessed are you who are poor, for yours is the kingdom of God. ²¹“Blessed are you who are hungry now, for you will be filled. “Blessed are you who weep now, for you will laugh. ²²“Blessed are you when people hate you, and when they exclude you, revile you, and defame you on account of the Son of Man. ²³Rejoice in that day and leap for joy, for surely your reward is great in heaven; for that is what their ancestors did to the prophets. ²⁴“But woe to you who are rich, for you have received your consolation. ²⁵“Woe to you who are full now, for you will be hungry. “Woe to you who are laughing now, for you will mourn and weep. ²⁶“Woe to you when all speak well of you, for that is what their ancestors did to the false prophets. (Luke 6:17-26)

In the 4th century BCE, the Greek philosopher Aristotle put pen to papyrus and began to write what would become one of the most enduring treatises on the art of rhetoric – a manual on how to persuade an audience... how to draw attention to a cause or convince others to accept a truth or idea. And, for Aristotle, it all began with “ethos.”

In ancient Greece, the word *ēthos* meant something akin to “character” or “personality.” Aristotle used the term to convey the point that, in order to communicate effectively, a good speaker must first connect with their audience, and that they can do this by sharing who they are. When Aristotle talked about establishing an “ethos,” he meant something that began with a feeling, a mood, a vibe... but also something deeper... something more substantive that is rooted in speaker’s character. A speaker who wants to convince the world of a better way to be must first give their audience a sense of their values, moral priorities, and guiding beliefs. If they can establish an ethos, the audience will then – and only then -- be able to decide if this person is someone they want to listen to.

As I thought about ethos over the past week, I happened across the website of Brenchley and Matfield, a primary school located about 50 miles southeast of London. The school is so named because it sits about halfway between two neighboring communities – Brenchley and Matfield – which also happen to be the homes of the two Anglican churches that founded and support the school: All Saint’s Church in Brenchley, and St Luke’s Church in Matfield. Either Google or God -- depending on your view of the world -- led me to their website because the school takes its ethos very seriously. Prominently listed near the top of the drop-down menu is a page titled, “Our Christian Ethos and Values,” and it reads:

“We believe that every member of our school community is unique, created in God’s image, and precious to Him. [As] Christians [we] are called to ‘love [our]neighbor as [ourselves]: this means that we have a responsibility to one another to look for, bring out, and encourage in one another the very best we can. To do this best we need to welcome and



employ in the life, work, and relationships of our school community the teaching, example, and Spirit of Jesus. This guiding ethos will be shown in and through us by the following values:

- **GRACE**
looking at people the way Jesus looked at them by keeping the teaching of Jesus in our hearts and patiently encouraging the best in others
- **COMPASSION**
caring for people the way Jesus cared for them
- **FORGIVENESS**
accepting a person's 'I'm sorry' and giving them a fresh start as Jesus did so that we too may be reconcilers and peacemakers
- **INTEGRITY**
always speaking the truth in love as Jesus did and having the courage to stand up for what is true and right and just and fair
- **HUMILITY**
not thinking too much of ourselves but putting others first, trusting in God's challenging wisdom so that we may grow in faith, hope, and love.”¹

Aristotle would be proud of this school, because it is doing exactly what Aristotle had in mind. Right from the beginning, any parent or community member who is wondering what Brenchley and Matfield primary school is all about is given an introduction to the character, values, and personality of the school. Don't you imagine that this ethos – this transparent understanding of who the school is and what it wants to be – don't you know that this ethos sets the tone for everything that happens in that school: classwork, field trips, recess on the playground, athletics on the pitch, performances in the theater or the orchestra room, meals in the lunchroom... everything. The ethos creates an atmosphere of values and priorities that keeps the school running the way it is meant to run.

The Jesus we meet in the gospels does the same thing. In each of the two biggest teaching events of his ministry – the Sermon on the Mount in Matthew, and the Sermon on the Plain in Luke – Jesus begins by creating an ethos – establishing a mood, a tone, and a character for everything to come. In Matthew's gospel, the very first words of the Sermon on the Mount are familiar to many: *“Blessed are the poor in spirit, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven... Blessed are those who mourn, for they will be comforted. Blessed are the meek, for they will inherit the earth.”* Right from the outset, Jesus works to create an “Ethos of Blessedness” – an ethos that prioritizes and values things that the world does not – things like a thirst for goodness and righteousness, mercy, purity, peace, courage in the face of persecution.

The teaching from this morning's passage from Luke is like the Sermon on the Mount in Matthew, but there are very important differences. In the Sermon on the Plain – that is the name that has been given to this lesson because it was not on a “mount” but on “a level place” – the Ethos of Blessedness is polished and sharpened.

First of all, the ethos is pressed with ***a greater urgency upon Christ's followers***. When Jesus came to that level place, we are told that a great crowd pressed in upon him. People had come to hear his teaching, and they had come to be healed by him. The crowd began pushing closer and closer, wanting to touch the man with healing power. Despite this surging

¹ <https://www.bmprimary.org.uk/our-christian-ethos-and-values/>

mass of people, the passage tells us that Jesus turns and fixes his eyes squarely on his disciples. Everyone else was welcome to hear, but this message was for people who had made the decision to follow him.² Everyone else was free to audit, but this teaching was for his committed students. Remember that the disciples were people who had made sacrifices to follow and learn. They had left livelihoods behind, they had left families behind, because they wanted to share in the way of life Jesus was advocating. This was a message not so much for bystanders or curiosity seekers, but for people who were serious about their faith. And Jesus wanted those serious people to know that there was an urgency in the teaching they were about to receive.

A second difference of the Sermon on the Plain is that it was not as metaphorical or spiritualized as the Sermon on the Mount had been. In Luke, the teaching is **earthier, grittier, and more tangible**. For example, in the Sermon on the Mount, Jesus says *"Blessed are the poor in spirit, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven."* In our minds, we can envision all kinds of ways to be "poor in spirit." Maybe it means to be sad or depressed. Or maybe we are feeling a bit poorly, like we have a mild cold. We can imagine all kinds of things that a poverty of spirit might mean.

Not so in Luke. In Luke, we are not on a grassy, breezy hillside overlooking the lake. We are down on hard, level ground, because in Luke Jesus says, *"Blessed are you who are poor, for yours is the kingdom of God."* He is not talking about a metaphorical spiritual condition. He is talking to people who are suffering because they do not have enough money, enough food, enough shelter. In other words, he is talking to people who are materially, painfully, undeniably poor. This teaching is different because it speaks clearly and directly about real things, material things, like poverty, hunger, hate, exclusion, and oppression. And it speaks clearly and directly to how Jesus expects real disciples to live day by day, minute by minute.

Last but not least, a third key difference in the Sermon on the Plain is that it balances the promises of better things to come with warnings about bad things that could happen. Jesus' Sermon on the Mount is all about consolations – good news about better times coming. But his Sermon on the Plain takes it all a step further, because it strikes a contrast between good choices and bad choices. Just as the psalm we just read suggests, there are good paths that we can take, ones that transform us into healthy trees in green spaces with plenty of water; but there are also darker paths that we are often tempted to take, ones that lead to pain and difficulty, and eventually dry us up and take us down. So, in the Sermon on the Plain, Jesus also includes warnings about the paths that lead to pain and brokenness: *"woe to you who are rich, for you have received your consolation... woe to you who have plenty now, for you will be hungry... woe to you who are laughing now, for later on you will mourn and weep."* In other words, be very careful if you feel like you are winning the game of life, because those paths can be very dangerous.

These are not easy words for us to hear as people who have grown accustomed to living in one of the richest, safest, and best-fed countries in the world. But it is a key aspect of the Ethos of Blessedness. In fact, it is right there in the meaning of the word. In Greek, word *makários* can be translated as to be blessed, fortunate or happy – but its most literal meaning is to be "extended" or "made large."³ Essentially, Jesus is saying to his disciples and to all those who would follow him, "If you really want to live a big life... if you want

² Peter Krol, "Word by Word," <https://www.logos.com/grow/nook-the-sermon-on-the-plain/>

³ "makarios," <http://biblehub.com/greek/3107.htm>

your life to take root and flourish and bear good fruit... then I will show you the Way.” But it all begins with a new set of values... a different kind of character... a new way of defining what a large life looks like. As Aristotle said thousands of years ago, it all begins with an ethos.

And the ethos that Jesus presents – this Ethos of Blessedness -- transforms everything. As a starting point, it is radical and countercultural, because the world is singing a much different tune about how to live large, about how to make ourselves happy and fulfilled. Whose ethos are we going to buy? Do we live a blessed life by grabbing as much as we can, or by sharing what we have so that everyone has enough? Do we get there by beating others down... or by lifting them up? Do we make ourselves larger by looking out only for ourselves, or by genuinely caring for others?

I will say that, right now, it seems like the ethos of the world has the upper hand. But I will tell you, in a world where might seems to be winning out over right... where the meek seem to be losing out to the strong... where those whose bellies are fat and full seem to be laughing at those who are hungry and hopeless... a few things still give me hope.

And one of them is a primary school out in the English countryside, where little children are being taught that every person is precious in God’s sight... that we are called to love our neighbors as ourselves... that each one of us has *“a responsibility to one another to look for, bring out, and encourage in one another the very best we can.”* Everything that happens there is guided by an Ethos of Blessedness – a way of life that makes a choice to value and prioritize things like grace, compassion, forgiveness, integrity, and humility.

When Isaiah spoke about the Messiah to come, the prophet said that he would be wise, gentle, and righteous... that he would judge with fairness and lead with equity... and that the world would be so transformed that the wolf would lie down with the lamb and calves and lions would live in peace together... and *“a little child shall lead them.”*

So I say, God bless you Brenchley and Matfield! Lead on, little children, because your Ethos of Blessedness is the very same one that Jesus taught on the Mount, preached on the Plain, and shared at every other turn of his ministry. He offers this vision with urgency and hope to you, to me, to anyone, anywhere, who would be his disciple.

Amen.