

## The Meek

### Essay 4 in the series “The Beatitudes”

“Blessed are the meek,  
for they will inherit the earth.”

Jesus with these words, as with all his Beatitudes, is launching nothing less than a revolution in human hearts. He is saying this first to Galileans many of whom were prepared to take up arms against Rome, who gloried in heroic tales of the Maccabees, who longed for a strong, courageous military leader who could lead them to victory.

In one way or another though, Jesus is always saying this. To those who are easily angered, quickly defensive, habitually resentful, who seek to outrage others, who make it their business to outrage others, who promote controversy and undermine trust, who know nothing of moderation or tolerance or reverence for others, who are too sure of themselves, who believe they know the mind of God in all things, who stereotype and scapegoat and blame, who demonize and dehumanize others, who consistently leave in their wake suspicion and paranoia, Jesus says, “Blessed are the meek, for they will inherit the earth.”

So what is Jesus saying, and why is he saying it? With this Beatitude, Jesus is drawing on Psalm 37 which begins, “Do not fret because of evil men ... for like the grass they will soon wither,” and then in verses 10-11, reads, “A little while, and the wicked will be no more; though you look for them, they will not be found. But the meek will inherit the land and enjoy great peace.”

Still the word “meek” does not resonate with us. It for sure did not back then in those dark days. It did, however, resonate in the classical world. In fact, “meek” – in Greek *praus* – was one of the great ethical words in the classical world. For Aristotle, it was the Golden Mean between excessive anger and excessive angerlessness. It was knowing when to take your stand and when not to. It was anger that was selfless, on behalf of others, not anger that was selfish, on behalf of self. It described a person who had instinct, impulse and passion under control. It described a person who knew his or her own limitations and weaknesses, who was open to learning from others and from changing times. It described a person who was no longer stuck, who no longer needed to have things go in just one particular way, who was still strong inside regardless of what happened. And now it is of such people that Jesus says, “They will inherit the earth.”

It was this that Jesus meant that night before his crucifixion in the garden when Peter drew his sword and, slashing around, cut off the ear of one of the High Priest’s servant and Jesus turned on him and rebuked him saying, “All who draw the sword will die by the sword” (Matthew 26:52). Jesus was saying then, was always saying by the way he lived and by the way he died, that the things that really matter are not done by force. And we all know that. We have always known that. We know what happens when we force things, when we force decisions, when we force issues, when we force relationships and

friendships, when we force conversations, when we force our careers (the losses we suffer), when we force our agendas – the ways we want things to be – on others.

It's this notion of meekness that Václav Havel, Czech playwright, dissident and eventual president, works with in his electrifying 1978 essay on "The Power of the Powerless." His compelling assertion was that when people are up against a society or a political structure or an economic system they feel they cannot change, they can. They can change it, not by political methods but by existential or spiritual means, by not even aspiring to political power but instead: simply living every day "within the truth," seeking the truth, telling the truth, insisting on the truth, being willing to say that the emperor has no clothes, refusing to give up, constantly doing the best they can, never surrendering their inner freedom, caring for those who cannot speak up for themselves, and realizing that in the end it is always God who saves. Within two years, Solidarity in Poland acted on these principles, and the rest is history. Such people inherit the earth.

This is what Jesus taught over and over: "Turn the other cheek." "Go the second mile." "Love your enemies." "Forgive those who sin against you." It's why he rebuked those of his disciples who wanted to call down fire from heaven on an unfriendly village (Luke 9:51ff.). It's why when he sensed that the 5000 were intending to make him king by force he withdrew to a mountain by himself (John 6:1-15). It's how he died: in excruciating pain, and throbbing nail wounds, gasping for every breath while passers-by hurled insults at him. It's what Paul knew when at the end of his life having always been stormy and passionate, having always been a brilliant controversialist, he counseled his young disciple Timothy to not have anything to do with foolish and stupid arguments (2 Timothy 2:23).

So with these Beatitudes, nothing less than a fresh wind, a fresh wind of the Spirit, begins to bring life back to the dry bones of human civilization. And this third Beatitude commends to us amazing strength, the strength of character and heart found in meekness. It's wide open to mystery, to awe and wonder, to miracle, to paradox and multiple perspective. To either/or, it offers both/and. To the penetrating light of cold logic, it wisely adds the warmth of intuition. Where others build walls, it builds bridges. In place of what is authoritarian, it honors authenticity. In place of conformity, it celebrates diversity. In place of the quest for certainty, it offers intellectual modesty and openness to others. And it makes it conceivable that all people might one day come together in love and understanding, learning from their differences. "Blessed are the meek, for they will inherit the earth."

Let's go back to how Václav Havel in 1978 concluded his "The Power of the Powerless." He writes this, remember, under the dark cloud of Soviet oppression. He himself shortly after would be imprisoned. But this is what he concludes about the "The Power of the Powerless": "The real question is whether the brighter future is really always so distant. What if, on the contrary, it has been here for a long time already, and only our own blindness and weakness has prevented us from seeing it around us and within us, and kept us from developing it?"

So God calls us to that strength that is meekness: to tell and live the truth regardless of the consequences to ourselves; to constantly do the best we can; to know when to take a stand, and when not to; to never surrender our inner freedom; to care for those who cannot speak up for themselves; to be aware of our own limitations and weaknesses; to be open to learning from others and from changing times; to realize that in the end it is always God who saves. And when we recognize our own limits and fully realize our dependence on God and on God's grace, there comes into our lives a deep sense of soul relief, of freedom, the first hints of euphoria, the first signs of a state called beatitude.

And then we see that the bright future – the kingdom of God – is not at all distant. It has been here for a long time already. It has always been here around us and within us. But it all begins with meekness, being real and honest and open, letting go, releasing, relaxing, and recovering our souls. No pretension. No grandstanding. No play-acting. No claim to special goodness. No claim to special brilliance. No claim to special anything. Just our emptying ourselves so that God might fill us.

It is such people who inherit the earth.

– Dale Pauls