

This morning, in the first few minutes after awaking while reorienting to the world, it occurred to me that the Beatitudes have an answer to my perennial bugaboo, the opening of Ecclesiastes: "Vanity of vanity; all is vanity."

As I have written elsewhere in this blog, during my late teenage years in the late 60s a confluence within myself of Ecclesiastes 1:2 and the huge cultural seachanges of that time left me with a nagging despair. Nothing seemed worth it; what is the use in pursuing a career or a life (we did not then think in terms of "lifestyles") that will end up in a stale, ossified culture that can but fearfully try to preserve itself, only to have it all lost as vain at death anyway? It was not until many years later that I saw *The Graduate*; though I was not in a situation like Benjamin's in essentially every respect, I did closely identify with him in this respect: I felt the pressure of a culture that seemed to demand that one surrender to it, be swallowed up by it, in order to survive. My response then was an instinctive "no." To be sure I could not have clearly described that then, but in retrospect I understand that was my response.

In focusing closely on the Beatitudes of Matthew 5 over the last week for an upcoming discussion with some friends, a couple of days ago the phrase "...will be satisfied" suddenly popped to my attention in the context of those who hunger and thirst to see right prevail (following the Revised English Bible's reading.) The promise of that phrase transformed what I have heard all of my life; if justice is what I want, if that is what drives me forward as if it were my very food and drink, I will be satisfied. (The discussion of John 4 with the disciples after the discussion with the woman at the well comes to mind.)

This morning in the first few minutes of my post-awakening musings I coupled that promise of the Beatitudes to the conundrum of Ecclesiastes 1:2, and I suddenly knew that I had an answer to the despair that has and still does, in varying degrees, whisper in the back of my thinking. Not all is in fact lost. If my life's focus is on what I best understand of Jesus' purpose, if I am willing to let him form me as I go, then what I put into the coming kingdom of God is in fact not lost. If what I want is justice, or peace, or the other values of the kingdom of God, those ends are not vain. Those desires will be satisfied.

What we want is the pivotal issue. If we want to be well thought of, or comfortable, we will have gotten out of it what we want; our desires will have already been satisfied. And, by the way, that will exclude us from the coming kingdom; if we do not want it now, why would we want it then? If we want that which Jesus wants, that cannot possibly be satisfied now; that must await the coming of the kingdom, and he will be delighted to see that we are satisfied together with him at its fulfillment (cf. Jesus' comments at the Last Supper.)

Once again one's eschatology seems important. If, as is broadly accepted in evangelical circles today, our destination is "going to heaven" as a totally separate, independent existence that has nothing to do with this earth and is not particularly coupled to our existence now (except in some sense of judgment for things done here,) this will not make much sense. If however one understands that our destiny is resurrection on a new/renewed heaven and earth, that our purpose as the church is to work toward actualizing the kingdom now to the extent to which we are able, then our work to that end is not in vain. That is the promise of the Beatitudes. From this latter view Matthew 25 makes much more sense; such actions are not merely about "good

works” to the poor and helpless with some future judgment in mind, rather they are motivated by living out the radical ethic of the kingdom now, looking ever for the not yet, awaiting its fulfillment at the parousia.

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