

You are probably aware of the phrase, “Famous Last Words.” But it is also true that a public figure’s first words can have great impact and be remembered for a very long time. For example: with the inauguration of a new president in our rearview mirror already, here are a couple memorable quotes from inaugural addresses. See if you can name that president.

“Let me assert my firm belief that the only thing we have to fear is fear itself.” That was Franklin Delano Roosevelt.

“[the] rights of man come not from the generosity of the state, but from the hand of God...ask not what your country can do for you; but what you can do for your country.” That was John F. Kennedy.

Those phrases and thoughts still echo in our minds—that’s the power that “first words” can have. And so it should be with great interest that we receive the words of Jesus from today’s gospel reading. In a certain way, the words that begin Matthew 5 are the start of Jesus’ inaugural address, which is often referred to as the Sermon on the Mount. And what is clear from the outset is that Jesus has an agenda that is completely unique. He describes values that are counterintuitive, meaning they run against the grain of normal experience. It takes guts to lead off like this. From his opening statement, Jesus sends the message that he has come to comfort the disturbed and disturb the comfortable. I don’t know which category you fall into today. But listen to Jesus’ words, and you will hear him give you a different definition of power; a different definition of blessing, and a different definition of life. Let’s dig in.

First; a different definition of power. We take it for granted that leaders have power and want more. It is a comic book cliché that just about every villain wants to “rule the world” and will take extreme measures to accomplish their goal. But it would be naive to think that lust for power is only fictional. We could have a lively conversation about what the envy of power has done to our political culture, not to mention just about any organization you might be a part of, or your personal relationships. We tend to associate power with wealth, victory, strength, dominance, and aggression. And here comes Jesus, announcing that the kingdom of heaven belongs to (right now) people who are poor in spirit. Jesus comes along and says, mourners are blessed, the meek are blessed, peacemakers are blessed, people persecuted and hated because of Him are blessed. If it sounds to you like Jesus’ agenda is the exact opposite of a worldly power grab, I’d say you’re on to something. Jesus is going to accomplish his ends not by acquiring power, but by giving it away. It’s the dynamite of sacrifice we were talking about last week.

Next, Jesus gives a different definition of blessing. Be honest; when you hear Jesus attach "blessing" to things like "poor in spirit," or mourning, being a peacemaker, being hated, that may not square with the blessings you're looking for. Just like with power, we tend to associate blessing with wealth, victory, happiness, and an absence of conflict. We feel blessed when everything is going well. But Jesus basically turns that upside down, and gives it a good shake.

This different definition of blessing is more than just a weird quirk of Jesus' teaching; it is absolutely central to understanding him. His very first words are a perfect example. "Blessed are the poor in spirit, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven." To make sense of this, we need to know what Jesus means by "poor in spirit." Taken at face value, the person who is poor in spirit does not have what they need in the spiritual realm. They don't know what they need, or they have given up on their own ability to "be spiritual." And this is the group that Jesus calls "blessed." Why? Because these people, who are poor, running on empty, can be given to. Like the old hymn *Rock of Ages* says so well, "nothing in my hand I bring; simply to Thy cross I cling." The full statement is, "Blessed are the poor in spirit, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven." Please take note, Jesus is describing a present reality! Bible scholars are quick to point out that this is a present tense verb. The poor in spirit are blessed **now** because theirs is the kingdom of heaven now, right now! The poor in spirit who come to Jesus with empty hands and open hearts will be filled with his sacrificial love, and that's heaven on earth. That's blessing, according to Jesus.

He once told a story to put a human face on this. It was about a Pharisee and a tax collector, who both went up to the temple to pray. The Pharisee would have considered himself "rich in spirit," because in his prayer, he thanked God that he was not like other men who were blatant sinners, and he presented his resume to God of fasting and tithing. The tax collector, on the other hand, stood in a corner, beat his own chest and prayed, "Lord, have mercy on me, a sinner." He was "poor in spirit," yet Jesus says that he is the one who went home justified that day. He went home forgiven--not guilty in God's eyes--because he recognized his spiritual poverty. His hands were empty, and he could be given to. The Pharisee could not be given to. Why not? Because his hands were full. He was carrying his resume to show God why he deserved his status. But he would never really be blessed until he tears his resume to shreds.

Professor Jeffrey Gibbs says it like this: "Already now the blessings of the reign of heaven in Jesus belong to those who in themselves do not have spiritual ability or strength. And this is complete good news." It is complete good news, because Jesus, at the beginning of his inaugural address, promises to fill human emptiness. The poor in spirit are given heaven. People who mourn loss, death, evil and sin will be comforted. Those who are gentle, those who

make peace, those who endure persecution in Jesus' name are heading towards a future so strongly positive that it alters the way they look at today.

But how? How does this work? How does Jesus do this? It is the third "different definition." Jesus gives us a different definition of life. What does that mean? It means, these are not just sayings of Jesus. Jesus lived all of these. Think about it. Jesus became poor in spirit so that you could share in the riches of heaven. The apostle Paul writes that Jesus "did not consider equality with God something to cling to, but made himself nothing, taking on the nature of a servant." Jesus knew the agony of mourning. He groaned and wept at the tomb of Lazarus, and in the Garden of Gethsemane was under intense stress at the thought of his own death. Jesus was utterly meek in the face of aggression, battered as he was by the temple guard and Roman soldiers, he did not strike back in revenge. Jesus became the ultimate peacemaker, though the terms of that peace cost him his life. Jesus endured hatred and persecution, all so that you and I could know true love and total freedom. Jesus did it all. His life counts for you. When you trust that; when you trust in Him, everything He did is credited to your account. Being connected to Jesus' life is what life is all about. And the more you explore your connection with him, the more you become like him. His attitudes become yours; you value what he values. New power, new blessing, new life, it's all yours, a gift of grace, the kingdom of heaven for you, right now.