

## The Stations of the Cross and the Beatitudes, Week 1 2021<sup>i</sup>

### ***A Guide to Spiritual Practice for Lent***

Once in a while over the years we have had a Shrove Tuesday in a public place, the making of pancakes and giving them away. Teenagers on the way to school particularly appreciated them. Why would you do that?, I hear you say. It is a way of reminding people that Easter is only 40 days away and what is Easter about?

LENT are those 40 days which prepare us to encounter the mystery and power in the stories of the death and resurrection of the Christ. It is the time in the traditional Christian calendar to experience the transformative meanings of the Passion story.

The Sermon on the Mount begins with this manifesto of hope and promise in the Beatitudes. They introduce the heart of Jesus' teaching to his followers. Jesus' nine Beatitudes in Matthew address the suffering which so many of his followers experienced in everyday life in Roman-occupied Israel. Luke's shorter set of sentences is more focused on tangible poverty and oppression.

The Stations of the Cross are an old Roman Catholic tradition. They mark fourteen stages along the path from Jesus' condemnation to death until his burial (Luke 23). If you have ever encountered a ceremony which journeys the stations of the cross you may be enriched with the encounter, I have been.

Some of the Stations correspond to actual passages in the New Testament accounts of Jesus' Passion. But others have no corresponding verses in the New Testament. Jesus' encounter with Veronica, for example, at Station number 6, is based on a legend that developed long after the biblical era. The Stations have always been evocative and interpretive, rather than simple historical representations. They remind us that we have great freedom to read new meanings into Christianity.

This guide invites you to walk with the Beatitudes and the Stations, a few steps at a time, through each of the weeks of Lent. It invites you to join in study, conversation, meditative prayer, artistic creativity, and compassionate action.

I encourage you to use it for private devotion leading up Tuesday 9<sup>th</sup> March where you are invited to join as a group for the last four weeks heading to Easter. More information will come on time and venue.

*This guide presumes that:*

1. ... the parts of the Passion and Easter stories that appear to be fanciful or supernaturalistic do not need to be taken literally in order for us to experience their extraordinary significance. The myth and poetry in these stories are portals into the realm of the soul. They provide us with essential structures of meaning, and guide us toward higher consciousness and greater compassion. "Just because something didn't really happen doesn't mean it isn't really true!"
2. ... the historical context of the Beatitudes and the Passion and Easter stories offers us a useful lens through which to interpret them. The social and political circumstances of Jesus' time can serve as mirrors for us to reflect on the personal and public moral choices that lie before us today.
3. ... the stories and traditions of Lent and Easter are many-layered. They meet us at historical, political, mystical, transpersonal, moral, intellectual, and aesthetic levels.

**You are invited to explore them all!**

**Lenten Action:**

I know that some of you are already engaged with a variety of community facing, paid and voluntary positions. You are already doing Lenten Action. Hopefully in our Sunday Services we might hear from you? Others are invited, as an individual or as a group, to commit to action for positive social change during Lent. This can take many forms: service to the homeless, working on a campaign, or many other types of charitable and/or advocacy work for the common good, whether as a volunteer or as a professional. It can be an ongoing work of service, or a short-term commitment during the weeks of Lent. If for any number of valid reasons you can't engage in these ways, take an active interest in what others are doing. Find, discover an organisation online, learn about their work. This guide invites you to reflect on your experiences and observations as well as an opportunity in our Sunday Service to report back.

**Week 1: Ash Wednesday, Feb 17<sup>th</sup> through Sunday, Feb 21<sup>st</sup>:**

*Beatitude One: "Blessed are the poor in spirit, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven." (The version of this Beatitude in Luke 20: 20 says: "Blessed are you who are poor, for yours is the kingdom of God.")*

Jesus' opening sentences of his Sermon on the Mount, called the Beatitudes, were and still are words that turn the world upside down. Around him on the Mount were plenty of people who were poor in spirit and in substance, and it was hard for them to see that things ever could be different. Jesus started his teaching with a truly radical premise: the "kingdom of heaven" is going to ennoble those who are lowly in status and condition, and lift up those who are virtuous in spirit. And the "kingdom of God" that Jesus promised as the reward is not just bye-and-bye in the sky, but rather is already "among you" (Luke 17:21). Some may not be able to perceive this emerging kingdom of heaven on earth. "But blessed are your eyes, for they see, and your ears, for they hear," said Jesus (Matthew 13: 16), in a verse that might also be considered a "Beatitude".

Jesus' first Beatitude challenged the prevailing idea about which people were worthy and which were unworthy, which were clean and which were unclean, in first-century Israel. The Jewish ruling class oppressed the common people by brainwashing them to feel badly about being unable to obey a detailed "holiness" code that only wealthy people possibly could afford the time and resources to follow. "...Jesus challenged the connection between righteousness and prosperity made by conventional wisdom, with its corollary that the poor had not lived right and thus were 'unworthy' children of Abraham." (Marcus Borg in "Jesus: A New Vision", p 136)

In the jarring, paradoxical words of the Beatitudes, Jesus says that those who are poor, either in spirit or in status, will be "blessed" (*makarios* in the original biblical Greek, meaning "fortunate" or "happy" in the sense of being "a privileged recipient of divine favour"). He declared that this was so, despite the overwhelming evidence to the contrary surrounding him and his listeners. Still today, the Beatitudes invite us to look beyond the bad news that surrounds us. They invite us to seek out signs of the good news of the kingdom of heaven that is being created by faithful people who take action for compassion and justice.

### Station One: Jesus is condemned to death by Pontius Pilate.

(New York Artist, Gwyneth Leech was commissioned in March 2004 to paint stations of the cross that blend traditional Christian iconography with contemporary elements. She found a vivid way of depicting Christ's journey to the cross for modern viewers, by incorporating the suffering and grief of people around the world who are caught in the midst of armed conflict.)



Much of traditional Christian theology claims that Jesus was crucified as a blood sacrifice for the sins of humanity. But from an historical perspective, the reason was much different. Jesus was crucified because he was considered a threat to the Roman military and political occupation of Israel.

Israel was occupied by the Roman empire in the time of Jesus. The Romans were threatened by anyone who might lead the people to rise up against them, or any kind of public disturbance that might grow out of Rome's ability to control it. The native Jewish authorities sought to avoid direct Roman meddling in Jewish affairs as much as possible. Any kind of public disorder might invite the Romans to bypass the Jewish Sanhedrin's counsel and intervene directly. Jesus upset this delicate power balance by attracting a lot of attention from the crowds who had

come from all over Israel to celebrate Passover in Jerusalem. Jesus did not directly condemn the Roman occupiers, but he repeatedly and publicly insulted the Jewish ruling class in his defence of the interests of the common people. Pilate himself recognized that Jesus had committed no crime. But he deemed it necessary to have Jesus killed so that public order could be maintained. So he ordered the execution even as he washed his hands of it.

### Station Two: The cross is laid upon Jesus.



The Roman guards forced Jesus to carry his cross to Golgotha.

The Romans thought that crucifixion would terrorize people into submission. The Romans thought the cross would "save" them from anyone who would dare to resist them, but it made them ever more enemies. Repeatedly they were caught in quagmires of conflict like the series of rebellions that happened in Israel. One cross wasn't enough; Jesus was hardly the only Jew who was tortured to death by the Roman occupying army.

The early Christians did something very radical: they turned a symbol of torture and state power into a symbol of personal and social liberation. They turned the Roman's meaning for the cross inside out and upside down. They made it the symbol of the victory of life over death, love over fear. A few hundred years after Jesus' death, the Roman empire was history, and the cross, with its Christian meanings, stood above the skylines of the cities the empire had once controlled.

**Questions:**

- I. Various translations of the first beatitude render “poor in spirit” as hopeless, humble-minded, aware of our spiritual poverty, or at the end of our rope. Which image(s) resonate for you? Why?
- II. In N. T. Wright’s *New Testament for Everyone*, the beatitude is applied not generically in the third person (to “those who”) but directly in the second person (“you”). How readily do you hear the beatitudes being addressed directly to you?
- III. When you hear the phrase “kingdom of heaven,” what images come to mind? What alternatives to “kingdom” of heaven – such as reign, realm, kindom, commonwealth – do you prefer? Why?
- IV. The Good News Bible says, “those who know they are spiritually poor...”. How important is it to know or recognize one’s spiritual state? How does one do that?
- V. When you have had times of deep despair, what has helped you feel drawn into the presence of God?
- VI. What did you think would “save” you, but turned out to “crucify” you instead?
- VII. What does our society think will “save” it, but turns out to “crucify” it instead?
- VIII. Is there any way that you can transform the meaning of a burden in your life into a sign of liberation?

**Meditation on your Lenten Action:**

Where do you find resonance, meaning, and inspiration in these Stations, and in this Beatitude, in the course of your work of service or advocacy so far?

**Artistic expression for Week One:**

Construct a cross out of images or objects representing whatever it is that “crucifies” you – or impoverishes you or the wider society in which you live, in spirit. What do you wish could save you, but is crucifying you instead? Examples: a cross made out of bottles of alcohol, a cross made out of images of nuclear weapons.

**Peace to you and yours****Colin**


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<sup>i</sup> adapted from [James Burklo](#)