

Reflection on the Gospel-Australia Day 2014
(Matthew 5:1-12)

-Veronica Lawson RSM

We have become so familiar with the beatitudes that there is a danger of our listening only to the mellifluous flow of language and of failing to attend to the extraordinary present and future reversal that they offer to those who suffer injustice and to those who choose non-violent ways of addressing it. With the escalation of violence across the globe and with powerful leaders opting for military rather than diplomatic solutions to global conflicts or threats, it is time to listen anew to these opening words of Jesus' Sermon on the Mount.

The mountain setting establishes Jesus as wisdom teacher like Moses of old. God's favour rests on the poor, on the gentle, on those who grieve for the pain of the world, on serious justice seekers, on those who know how to mercy, on the pure in heart, on peacemakers, and on those who suffer in the cause of right. The repetition of 'blessed are...' (a better translation of the Greek *makarioi* than 'happy') provides multiple links with Israel's collection of sacred songs, the Psalms. For Israel's lyricists, God's favour or blessing is on those whose hope is in God, on those whose delight is in God's way, on those who take refuge in God, on the guileless in spirit, and on those whom God forgives. The content of the beatitudes echoes the voice of Israel's prophets, especially Isaiah 61. God's spirit is upon Jesus. He brings the good news of God's present and future favour or blessing to the destitute and to those who mourn. The distinguishing mark of God's favoured ones is righteousness or right relationship.

God's favour or blessing comes in diverse forms: the *basileia* or empire of the heavens; comfort in the face of grief; the earth for a heritage; the joy of being mercied; face to face encounter with God; a great reward 'in heaven'. If heaven is only a place to be enjoyed in the afterlife, it is little consolation for the desperately poor or for those who are persecuted or misrepresented to know that 'the empire of the heavens is theirs' or that their 'reward is great in heaven'. 'Heaven' is better understood as a way of talking about God or God's empire of justice and compassion in contrast with the heartless empire of Rome and its modern equivalents. Maybe the most urgent invitation in our present context is to mourn strategically the displacement of so many of earth's inhabitants who long for the blessing of God's kin-dom in the form of comfort and mercy and a share of the earth's resources.