

The Beatitudes are poetry: I don't think we realise, these days, that Jesus often spoke in poetic form – another example would be 'He who exalts himself will be humbled, but he who humbles himself will be exalted'. This juxtaposition – exalts-humbles, humbled-exalted – is a traditional poetic form in Rabbinic teaching.

The Beatitudes also completely reverse the values of this world and replace them with – not the *values* of the kingdom, as is often asserted, but – the *characteristics or qualities* of the kingdom of heaven. That's a different thing. This world is characterized by cold pity for the poor, by embarrassment at the fact of death and those who grieve, contempt for the gentle, ridicule for the pure and by resistance to those who work for peace – mainly because there are too many individuals and institutions who make money out of war.

The facts are stated in the first line of the prayer that Jesus taught us: 'Our Father, who art in heaven.' Why not 'My Father'? Because, like it or not, salvation is never an entirely an individual affair; if it were only a matter of 'me and my salvation' you and your

salvation', the kingdom of heaven would be a pretty loveless place – which is a ridiculous impossibility. Again, whether we are comfortable with the idea or not, there is at the heart of creation an innate and indissoluble oneness – and there's nothing sentimental or superficial about this, because it is a *oneness of being*. I am, profoundly and in a way I will probably never grasp in this life, one with all that is, from the tiniest blade of grass to the most irritating person in my life. Because that's how God willed it to be. It is also why Jesus told us that whatever we do to the least of his brothers and sisters, we do to him.

It is only when we lose sight of this oneness that sin finds a way in. Without an authentic sense of the oneness of all life, there is only emptiness and meaninglessness. The French mystic and philosopher Simone Weil said that every sin is an attempt to fly from emptiness. 'My' means emptiness – 'our' means fullness.

This is why Jesus taught us to say '*Our* Father' and not 'My Father'.

‘Who art is heaven’. The implication is unmistakable: our Father is not here – at least, not in any substantial way. Through prayer, devotion, worship, yes – but here he does not have his temple. The Lord’s Prayer does not say ‘Who art on earth and in heaven’ or even ‘who art everywhere’. No. This brings us back to the radical conflict between the kingdoms of this world and the kingdom of heaven, that the Beatitudes in today’s gospel reading teach us.

The inescapable conclusion not only of the gospels, but of all scripture, not only of Catholicism but all Christianity, not only of one faith but of all religious faiths – the inescapable conclusion is that this world and life in this world is only a secondary reality – and not a terribly convincing one at that. This is exactly what the Beatitudes are saying.

Albert Einstein said: ‘This world is an illusion, but a remarkably persistent one.’

St Thérèse of Lisieux said: ‘Time is a mirage, an illusion: already God sees us in glory.’

The medieval Persian poet Jalal Rumi said: 'I saw that we are God's shadow, and the world is our shadow' - the world is no more than the shadow of a shadow.

In the Koran, it says: 'The Master Jesus, blessings and peace be upon him, said that this world is like a bridge: you may cross over it, but do not build your house on it.'

Of course, for the time we are here, for the time we are dreaming, we have to live according to its nature, if we are to survive and flourish well. And we should aim to flourish well. Jesus himself gave us the key to this when he said: 'Be as gentle as doves but as cunning as snakes.' That is: Be as loving as you can, but don't be anybody's fool. A perfect recipe for a perfect life in this virtual reality.

This is why Jesus taught us to pray: 'Our Father who art in heaven'. It is why the Beatitudes say: 'Blessed are the poor' and 'Blessed are the gentle'.