



EUROPEAN FORUM OF LESBIAN, GAY
BISEXUAL AND TRANSGENDER
CHRISTIAN GROUPS

BARCELONA 2010

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Lecture Natalia Reverdin:

THE BEATITUDES IN TIMES OF CRISIS

My presentation will consist of three parts.

A. Joy in the Bible

When we watch a film sequence shot in a church we often see gloomy, or even bored faces, listening to a long, dull sermon (at least this is how it looks) or one that requires either a lot of attention or a lot of previous preparation in order to understand it.

Protestantism put reading of biblical texts and preaching at the centre of cult, following the liturgical year with its readings suitable to each season and moment of Church life. This implies that the outgoing texts seldom refer to certain issues.

This is the case of joy, which is especially talked about on Christmas and Easter Sunday, but which is usually ignored during the rest of the year. There are moments and prayers of praise at the beginning of the services, but when it comes to preaching, joy seldom comes out as the main subject.

We all know that the Bible is a collection of books, and that it took 900-1,000 years to be written down, its authors being from different places, cultures and traditions.

Joy appears especially in the Psalms, in the Prophets talking about the return from exile, in the laws about festivities, and it is not a subject absent from the life of the people of Israel.

Joy can be very specific, personal (I rejoice when I am told "Let's go to the house of the Lord"), related to family (rejoice with the woman of your youth), to community joy, (They joyfully shared bread from house to house), eschatological (blessed is that who reads and that who listens).

There are different words to describe, joy, gladness, beatitude.

B: Joy in the theology of the church:

There have been several phases throughout history.

The first one corresponds to the first centuries, at the time of persecution against Christians.

There are two ways to envisage joy: martyrdom and after death.

It is an anticipating joy, which is not lived in the present, since the hostile environment provokes anguish, tribulations, difficulties. Joy is seen as a reward, not as a present reality. Although Paul and Silas are said to be "singing in prison", we can see that the Revelation forebodes a future joy for the chosen, the redeemed, the saved ones.

The Church started to proclaim the blessed and the saints as models among those who suffered martyrdom, as endurance models.

But then there followed centuries of prohibition of joy, pleasure and gladness, within and outside the church.

Festivities were ruled by the Church and the biblical text, the reading of which was banned, and with a forbidding price, was inaccessible to the common people.



EUROPEAN FORUM OF LESBIAN, GAY
BISEXUAL AND TRANSGENDER
CHRISTIAN GROUPS

BARCELONA 2010

When we read the plot of “The Name of the Rose”, where laughing is banned, we can guess the mood of the Church of that time: to ban joy.

The protestant Reform brought forward a dramatic change, since the return to the text, read individually and in the community, read as a whole, allowed access to subjects up till then unknown.

And once again the joy of faith is brought back, not only for life after death, but here and now.

After the Reform, which advocated the singing of the Psalms and other hymns, with pietism (and its collateral movements such as Jansenism, Hassidism, etc.) a liturgical change came about, producing texts and liturgical hymns that referred to the joy of present life.

In the 20th century, Pentecostal churches introduced once again this festive side into their communities.

I can recommend the book “la Joie imprenable” (The unyielding Joy”) by Lytta Basset, a Swiss theologian and pastor.

C: Joy in the Beatitudes

We can say that the Beatitudes are the Magna Carta of the Gospels.

We have two parallel texts of Matthew and Luke, (who by the way talks about the “plain” and not the “mount”)with coincidences and differences.

Luke’s text contains 4 beatitudes and 4 curses, while Matthew’s only refers to beatitudes.

Matthew 5, 1-12 (Luke 6, 17-26)

Before starting to comment on the text, I would like to mention some “findings” that we can make along the reading of the Greek text.

I also want to tell you that I rely on two comments, among thousand possible... the first one from Suzanne de Diétrich, “Mais moi je vous dis” (“But I am telling you”), Delachaux i Niestlé, 1965 and from Cardenal Martini, “el Sermón de la Montaña”(“The Sermon on the Mount”), ed PPC, 2008.

She was very active in the renewal of biblical studies at the level of international groups of protestant students and also at ecumenical level, from the 1930s until her death in 1981, and he is a great biblical expert in relation with the “original” text (collaborating in its 27th edition Nestlé-Aland) and with outstanding outreach work on Ignatius spiritual exercises. Both have in common their search for a practical application of the rigorous reading of the text in its context.

This is not a get together of theologians or experts, and I suggest that we should approach the text focusing on its present relevance.

Verses 1 & 2 : the great amount of actions in little time:

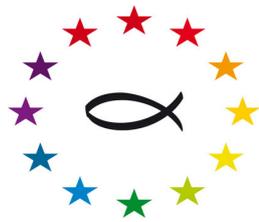
Jesus sees the crowds, goes up to the mountain, then sits down and his disciples come up to him.

He opens his mouth and begins teaching them, saying:

V.3 : poor, has mainly a meaning of “beggar”, or it refers to those who take shelter or hide because of their poverty.

As if poverty was the ultimate cause for shame, you cannot go any lower.

The Realm of Heavens is referred to in the present tense. The other beatitudes are expressed using the future, but this one uses the present.



EUROPEAN FORUM OF LESBIAN, GAY
BISEXUAL AND TRANSGENDER
CHRISTIAN GROUPS

BARCELONA 2010

This one deals with the poor in spirit, with those who are looking forward to having spirit, with those who know they lack spirit but they cannot live without it. This is way this phrase is usually translated as “ those who recognise their spiritual poverty”.

As if it said “Blessed are the beggars, they have at last found a safe shelter.”

V.4: “those who mourn” literally those who have suffered a loss, the distressed.

Those who endure losses: sentimental ? family ? espiritual ? (losses)

They shall be comforted : the passive always suggests God as the comforting agent.

They shall be comforted « by God ».

The form of aorist past tense in Greek always implies permanence. Comfort has began and it will not cease.

V.5: The meek are mainly the “sweet”, the soft, the “mansos” in Spanish (the mild-tempered in English).

They shall inherit the earth.

V.6 : the hungry and the thirsty.

But in the sense that they are hungering and thirsting for righteousness.

They shall be filled.

The original word (xortos= court?) it also means fodder, the freshly mown grass, which feeds the cattle.

V.7: the merciful: “elemonees” (alms), they shall also obtain mercy.

V.8: « Katharoi » tè kardia: the pure in heart.

V.9: The peacemakers. They shall be called by their name.

V.10 :Those who are persecuted for righteousness.

We can find the same verb in the three verses 10-12.

Persecute, be persecuted, persecuted.

V.11: pseudomenoi= to lie, to abuse, to deceive

V.12: xairete kai agalliaste, are the two ways to describe joy.

Rejoice and be glad.

I guess that “gay” comes from this second form. In its 1555 French translation, Sebastien Castellion says: “égayez-vous”.

The letter “y” would come from the “ll” in Greek.

Actually, the word gay, you know that, is the old way (as in French Roy or Oye), of writing “gai”, glad.

For those who play music, it is quite common to find the word gay or the adverb gayment in a Renaissance or French Baroque score.

Jesus, introduced by Matthew as the new Moses, proclaims the new law of the Realm of God, which he fully embodies.

The messenger and the message coincide in his person.

André Chouraqui, a Moroccan Jew who translated the whole Bible into French, and therefore also the New Testament, translates “makarioi”, which corresponds to the Hebrew Ashrei, happy,



EUROPEAN FORUM OF LESBIAN, GAY
BISEXUAL AND TRANSGENDER
CHRISTIAN GROUPS

BARCELONA 2010

blessed, as “en marche” (on the move); the beatitude is not a static position, it means setting out behind Jesus.

It is a living attitude, a “casting off” towards life.

COMMENTS:

Verses 1 & 2: Jesus goes up to the mountain, surrounded by his disciples, and the crowd is down there listening. There are no clouds, no thunder, no scare. He is amidst the people and proclaims the good news of the joy of the believers, of those who want to follow him.

V.3: The poor (beggars) are all those who have nothing and expect everything from God, their shelter. For centuries this term used to be interpreted as mentally handicapped, the “little poor”, who did not understand religion.

But, for some years now, its meaning has been extended . Now the text makes more sense. It is now also translated as “those who hold the spirit of poverty, or who are conscious of their spiritual need”.

Poor in spirit, and in spirit of poverty and humility.

These are the ones who reach the conclusion that richness does not bring about anything to their life. And the Realm of Heavens (in plural, shamaïm) is for them. It is a gift.

The poor are before God with their empty hands.

It already belongs to them, it is their main richness. When you have the Realm, you have everything, you are really rich, as opposed to the rich who think they have everything, but eventually it will be no use at all.

When Jesus says: “Blessed are the poor”, he says (according to Luke) “woe to you rich people”. Those rich in everything: in money, in properties, social status, and even in culture.. who think that they are above everybody else thanks to their own effort.

But they are not anything or anybody.

The Realm is only for those who know they are nothing or nobody, for those who are looking forward to receiving, because they know they lack everything.

“Happy are those who do not lean on themselves” (C. Martini, The Sermon, p.162)

V.4: the distressed, those who weep, who mourn, who endure all the hardships of life.

As an answer to Isaiah 61,1-3, Jesus is the one who embodies comfort for the people.

He opens up this time of comfort.

“Shall be comforted...”, the passive voice is used so as to show that God is the agent of comfort (some translations include this in order to clarify the text). The very fact of Jesus being present (let us never forget that the Gospel is a text a posteriori, resurrection had already taken place), is already a token of comfort for all, here and now.

“Those who mourn because God is not loved, those who learn to weep like Jesus for Jerusalem and the world” (Martini, p. 163).

V.5 The meek (mild-tempered) shall inherit or shall take over the earth.

Nowadays, the earth is subject to armed conflicts, violence, injustice. It belongs to the rich, the powerful, the violent, but this won't last for ever.

The first chapter of Isaiah begins with a description of corruption and of those who have turned their backs on God and crave for violence, with the immediate result of the earth suffering from distress and neglect.



EUROPEAN FORUM OF LESBIAN, GAY
BISEXUAL AND TRANSGENDER
CHRISTIAN GROUPS

BARCELONA 2010

According to Jesus, the earth shall be the property of the sweet, the humble (from humus, from mud), who follow the king who comes up to them humbly mounted on an ass (Matthew 21,5), who have a meek and quiet spirit (I Peter 3,4).

Thy will be done on earth as in heaven. The Realm of Heaven has its counterpart in the way of living up the Realm "on Earth", following the steps of the sweet, humble hearted Master.

The only correct (always revolutionary) path will be putting non-violence as a model for everyday life. Being sweet, humble, mild-tempered even before his "coming up".

"The meek in psalm 37,11, are those who don't do justice to themselves, those who act arrogantly." (Martini, p.164)

V.6: The hungry and the thirsty for righteousness shall be filled. Righteousness shall prevail in a land ruled by the sweet and the meek. This is the response to the waiting and the announcements of the prophets, expected by the people who can no longer stand living under such misfortune.

Righteousness and truth shall win: Isaiah 11,5; 42, 1-4; Psalm 72,1-5.

"The beatitude of having done good" (Martini, p. 166)

The first 4 beatitudes are addressed to all those who await the Realm, the Realm of God and see Jesus as its fulfilment.

Jesus provides them with the Realm.

They are its managers and have to make it start.

He is the King of that Realm of God or of Heavens, he is its real incarnation.

He himself is the poor, the distressed, the persecuted for this Realm that does not work with the rules of the world surrounding him. He is the meek, the hungry, the thirsty.

At the time of his proclaiming this, he has not been revealed as the Messiah yet, but the reader holds the key to understanding the text thanks to the Resurrected.

"He is the one who invites us to follow him and makes us start." (Martini, p. 167)

The other beatitudes, rather than a state, stand for attitudes that make the Realm actually work: mercy is God's characteristic feature, as revealed in the person of the Christ, who is merciful the same way that the Father is merciful to all his children. (Luke 6, 35-36)

Human beings are completely dependent on God's forgiveness upon their life.

Human beings are poor in mercy, they are always ready to judge the others, and plead themselves not guilty, having nothing to blame for.

The merciful take their poverty into account. They, who have a pure heart sympathise with the distress of the others. They shall see God.

Having a righteous, pure heart implies being sincere in deeds, words and gestures.

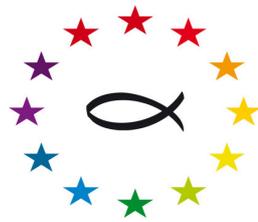
Only those who are sincere can peacefully await God's judgement on their life. One day they (the merciful) will see him face to face, in full. (John 3, 20-21; I Corinthians 13,12).

The peace makers shall be called (by God, once again the "passive) God's children. But they will set up the peace condition of the humankind wanted by God, according to God's vision of reconciling with and for his children.

They are the followers of the Messiah, who is the Prince of Peace, our peace (Isaiah. 9,5)

In the Old Testament, "God's child" refers mainly to the people of Israel (Hosea 11,1), but also to the individual believer. This is how Jesus uses it in Matthew, 45-48.

In the Last Judgment, God will recognize those who belong to him as his children (Revelation 21,7; Rom 8,14-15).



EUROPEAN FORUM OF LESBIAN, GAY
BISEXUAL AND TRANSGENDER
CHRISTIAN GROUPS

BARCELONA 2010

God is the God of peace, and his children are peace brokers among human beings and themselves and God. The believer's mission is always that of making peace.

"Those who work for peace are those who make peace, who spread out peace, who introduce peace where there is anger, division, conflict, slander. They try to reverse these situations by all means, casting out reconciling messages." (Martini, p. 165)

The hungry and the thirsty for righteousness, theirs is the Realm of Heaven.

Here the present tense is also used. It is the "already" of God on our lives.

These are the ones who take God's just and justifying justice of God as the motive behind their acting.

This implies keeping faithful to God to the utmost, through persecution and setbacks caused by life, society and I should add, by the very Church.

The hungry and thirsty for righteousness are everywhere subject to lack of understanding and to persecution by the wrongful.

Its highest expression is Jesus the Righteous on the Cross. (Is 52-53).

"Jesus, thus, wanted us to have in mind our beatitudes also where ill-treatment comes not only for not having done wrong, but for having done good "

(Martini, p.166)

The beatitudes are a whole.

Jesus opens up the Realm to those not expecting it, who would be excluded by those others who think they deserve it on their own merits.

Jesus opens it up to the humble, the meek, the poor, the unworthy in the eyes of the world, the ones who expect everything from God.

Jesus calls blessed those which the world describes as totally unfortunate.

One may be rich in the eyes of the world and poor in those of God.

Those who know they are poor (in spirit) are called to enter the Realm.

Those who are hungry and thirsty for righteousness up to the point of dying for its sake, since they have nothing else to lose.

Those who keep their heart open to the others.

He himself inaugurates this Realm. When he shows it, he does it starting from himself.

He is the guarantee that it can become real, because everything will be fulfilled in him.

The 9th beatitude shows the contradiction of being joyful through hardships, difficulties, setbacks, through persecution.

Jesus prepares his disciples in the possible event of their being persecuted for him, for righteousness, for the Realm, for the Gospel.

Saint Paul also lived this in flesh, and set an example to all believers (II Corinthians 12, 10)

It is the overturn of the world, of our view: Blessed are those who make their life dependent on God and not on themselves.

CONCLUSION

You have chosen this fundamental text of Christian faith for your Conference.

This text is very much up-to-date and highly appreciated by many of you who live your Christian faith in quite diverse personal, family, friendly and church situations.

We know what are many of the attitudes you have to face in many areas, and one of those may precisely be the church, or the churches, all of which read the same Gospel, which call themselves followers of Jesus and of the God of Love, but which are not often the reflection of this acceptance by Jesus of all those coming up to him.



EUROPEAN FORUM OF LESBIAN, GAY
BISEXUAL AND TRANSGENDER
CHRISTIAN GROUPS

BARCELONA 2010

Rigid, exclusive attitudes, out of context interpretation of biblical texts are mostly the first response (usually the only one) to your situation.

Attitudes which provoke suffering, broken relationships within the very communities that do not welcome difference.

Churches and communities whose criteria for a “good Christian” are based on those who attend the services, read the Bible, pray before meals, give their tithes, follow the rules of intellectual purity (they only read Christian books, only listen to Christian radio stations, only watch Christian films) of purity in relationships (they only relate with each other, since the rest of the world has been lost) of sexual purity, which implies that when a sister/brother in faith, with whom they had grown up and lived, have prayed and eaten, have gone out camping, comes out saying he or she is gay or lesbian, everything begins to stumble and that person is then considered as a “Christian no longer welcomed by the community” and they are put aside or expelled.

Jesus of Nazareth teaches us with his words, his gatherings, his deeds that those who consider themselves as the purest among all, are actually the farthest away from God.

After all, the strictest observers of the rule do it for themselves and not for God.

The manger is approached by shepherds who are far away from the Temple, and there are women at the bottom of the Cross.

In between, he meets prostitutes, tax collectors, pagans, lepers, he eats with them, gives them hope, dies like a political activist and comes back to God’s full life, and so is open to the whole world, without differences.

When he opens up his mouth in his first speech, he begins by saying: Blessedthe rich? The powerful? The standard? Those abiding by the law? The saints?

No : he says blessed are the poor, the little, the excluded, those who fight for other people’s rights, etc and in a parable, he introduces us to two men who come up to the Temple, one of them is glad he is not like those awful sinners, and the other one does not even dare look up to the sky... and Jesus also says: I will not reject anybody who comes to me, do come you the tired, the oppressed... he put the freedom to eat on the Sabbath well above its strict observance.

The objective of Jesus is make everybody discover the God of love, so that everybody may heal themselves relating with God and the others.

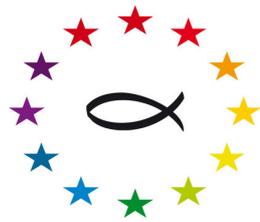
After him, the only applicable law is that of love, whatever condition yours may be: man, woman. Jew, pagan, slave, free person, poor, rich.. etc.

There is no difference, there is no exclusion and the church has to follow the model of its master: welcome everybody, assist everybody, live together, teach this word of life and freedom.

Some years ago a lady called me up and said: I have a problem, my son is gay. I am a mother and my question from mother to mother was (I suppose we mothers love our children in whatsoever condition of their life); “And is that a problem?” She replied: “It isn’t one for me, but it is for my church.” I answered back: “Madam, God is love and he loves your son the way he is.”

And this, that short, intense phone call was the beginning of one and other great friendships.

Actually, we had a precedent with a great friend, no longer among us, and who opened us up to your reality. That was Gérard Henriod, from Geneva, who would have been the first one to register and be with us today.



EUROPEAN FORUM OF LESBIAN, GAY
BISEXUAL AND TRANSGENDER
CHRISTIAN GROUPS

BARCELONA 2010

It was his fight with his family, his environment and the church he loved.

Born in 1936, Gérard came from an evangelical, very fundamentalist family and he decided to begin his pastoral studies in a faculty in Southern France, but after discovering his homosexuality, he saw his access to the ministry would be stopped.

He withdrew from theology, parted from his lifelong faith for some years and studied teaching, then becoming a magnificent teacher of French and history of Art in a secondary school in Geneva, always considerate towards the questions and the contradictions of the youth.

When I met him, he had resumed his faith, and had decided to try to study theology again in the Faculty in Geneva, and he was half way through his course, the semi-degree.

It took almost two years for him to tell us he was gay, perhaps fearing he would be rejected once again by the “representatives of faith”....

He used to come to Barcelona and I know for sure that he got in touch with Christian groups, but he complained about their little biblical and theological concern, and their main focus on catholic morals, on sin, etc, subjects which he had completely overcome.

But the infinitely loving and faithful presence of God was the motive and the light of his life. He made us learn the suffering that any person rejected for being homosexual has to endure, and especially because of those who should be the first to bear witness to the Christ who made no differences between the pure and the impure.

He made us reflect and eventually accept homosexuality within the church.

He used to send us texts published in magazines and he was rather angry with a certain cardinal ...

The church, the churches, cannot turn their backs on the reality of homosexuality (by the way, a term invented in the 20th century, which does not come out in the Bible). It is your fair struggle, for which you are being persecuted in many countries, and some (churches) have taken the heartfelt daring step to overcome ancient views and interpretations and become totally inclusive. But this has to be everybody's struggle, because it is a struggle against injustice, a struggle for human rights, a struggle for the Realm, where all are invited to come in.

Others are on their way, and have to learn how to overcome this reserve inherited from a moralist, strict interpretation, which does not convey the message of Jesus who said he would never leave aside anybody coming up to him, whoever they might be, when in lack of love, peace and forgiveness.

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