

All Saints – YrA – 5 November 2023

Message: *Our new humanity*

Creator, Redemer, and Giver of Life, known to us, through creation, blessed communities, blessed lives, and transcendent communion, may we know the Eternal Word and Way.

Amen.

For All Saints, we turn from looking at the teachings of Jesus final week to the first of the five sermons that Matthew's gospel presents, the sermon on the mount.

The overarching theme of the sermon is the Kingdom of God. '*Jesus went throughout Galilee... proclaiming the good news of the kingdom*' (4.23). The beatitudes, the first section of the sermon, are a great source of comfort to many people. When life is hard, the eight blessings offer encouragement that in the Kingdom of Heaven our troubles will become blessings.

However, the Beatitudes also speak to how we are to live life in the Kingdom of God in the here and now. These eight blessings describe the way we need to follow. These are the qualities that should be visible in our lives.

The reward of the first and last beatitude, "*for theirs is the kingdom of heaven*", Matthew's reverent term for the Kingdom of God, tell us the beatitudes are a whole that points to the expectations of those who would enter the Kingdom of God, following the way of Jesus of Nazareth.

Much is made of Matthew's inclusion of "*in spirit*" in the first beatitude when compares to St Luke's more revolutionary "*Blessed are the poor*". Yet, Matthew's version may be seen as

more nuanced. It avoids the dichotomy between “*the pious poor and wicked rich*”. Being poor, gives a nudge towards remembering our dependence on God, but it is no guarantee, though recalling the parable of Lazarus and Dives (Luke 16:19–31), the rich have received their reward.

The term poor in spirit is a little opaque. Poor in spirit is drawing on Hebrew imagery, “*The sacrifice acceptable to God is a broken spirit; a broken and contrite heart, O God, you will not despise.*” (Ps 51.17, see also Isa 57.15) This is the quality that should be visible in our lives, it is the humble walk with God spoken of in Micha 6.8.

“*Blessed are those who mourn*” doesn’t specify what we are mourning. We often apply it to those who experience the grief of the death of a loved one, in which case most people are blessed and it is an odd way to use the term though as most of the beatitudes are a bit odd not impossible. But perhaps the grief, particularly in light of the first beatitude, is the recognition of the ways we fall short of God’s design for our lives. In light of the third beatitude, it might also be those who mourn over the injustices of society. It is probably both.

The Lukan version of this beatitude, “*blessed are you who weep now, for you shall laugh*”, makes the contrast of the haves and the have-nots more obvious. Again, in Hebrew thought, the idea of mourning individual and corporate sin is far more obvious, it is the repeated theme of the story of Israel, seen in their history, psalms, and prophecies.

The church rarely takes the time to truly lament all that is wrong with the world, to sit and allow it to touch our

deepest parts so that it may propel us into action. We mourn with purpose, just as Christ cried over the city of Jerusalem.

“Blessed are those who hunger and thirst for righteousness” is again probably not to be heard as individualistic. Matthew’s inclusion of *“and thirst for righteousness”* at first sight completely changes the meaning of the beatitude when compared to Luke’s *“Blessed are those who hunger”*. Yet, if Matthew has in mind the righteousness of God, the deliverance of all people, removing the injustice of inequitable distribution of food, resources, and wealth is a close parallel. We too often sit on the sidelines of injustice, lacking the hunger and thirst for righteousness expressed here.

“Blessed are the merciful” brings us to one of Matthew’s core themes. Twice he quotes Hosea 6.6, *“I desire mercy, and not sacrifice.”* (9.13, 12.7) Mercy here is active, something to be done. It is an essential quality of God, *“The Lord, the Lord, a God merciful and gracious, slow to anger, and abounding in steadfast love and faithfulness... forgiving iniquity and transgression and sin”* (Exod 31.6b-7a). When we are merciful, we are walking in God’s way, reflecting God’s image in us. This is both individual and corporate. We too often judge others and fail in our compassion, forgiveness, and mercy, both individually and collectively.

“Blessed are the pure in heart” understood as being without fault, is a lost cause for any human, so it seems likely we should understand this as having a clear intention of heart, not being double minded. We cannot serve God and money; we cannot serve God and the world. Blessed are those who place God in their heart and at the centre of their lives. This

finds expression in all of the previous beatitudes, love God, love your neighbour as yourself.

“*Blessed are the peacemakers*” calls us to seek peace wherever there is conflict. It is no invitation to live peacefully. Behind the word peace is the Hebrew notion of shalom, a wholeness that touches every dimension of health, spiritual, mental, relational, physical, and rootedness as part of the earth, wholeness for people and for all creation. It seems like a hopeless task. Yet, our striving for such wholeness will give others vision and hope. Those who seek such wholeness are indeed children of God.

“*Blessed are those who are persecuted for righteousness’ sake*”, perhaps comes as a bit of a surprise. Surely no one can object to seeing the qualities of the first seven beatitudes in others. Well actually, many people will object and challenge us if we are really seeking these things. Our lives will point to there being a different way to follow from the way of the world.

“*Our broken and contrite heart*” is a direct challenge to the view that all is good with the world and that we can be at ease with what we see around us.

When we *mourn* the state of our lives and of society, we name what is wrong and needs to change, we challenge what other people see as right, or at least as normal, we become disruptors, we make other people uncomfortable.

When we seek *righteousness*, we will inevitably challenge those who benefit from the inequity of the world and we will point to the inequity running far deeper than we imagined.

When we are *merciful*, we will challenge ideas of revenge and retribution, flawed justice, and we will create real, and costly equity, and healing. We will forgive as God forgives with generosity and grace, which from a human perspective looks unfair because it fails to see the bigger picture.

When we place God at the centre of our hearts and lives, it will challenge other's priorities; it will make them uncomfortable and fight our priorities.

When we truly seek shalom, wholeness for all, there will be many people who are offended. We will see both sides of arguments; we will seek to find the paths where everyone flourishes and no one wins at the cost of others. Hearts of stone will find this too hard.

For all these reasons, if we really are followers of the way of Jesus of Nazareth, we, in our own lives and as a community of the body of Christ, should expect to be persecuted.

The ninth beatitude is an expansion of the eighth and frames us as prophets and we know how things went for the prophets of the Hebrew Scriptures. Prophetic messages are both challenging and encouraging, and rarely well received. Our message, lived out through our lives, should be challenging and encouraging, it won't be well received many, but for those who capture the vision, it will be life transforming, for us and for the lives we touch, bring shalom, the Divine wholeness, and, along the way, we will receive a foretaste of God's many blessings.

May God bless us with a restless *discomfort* about easy answers, half-truths, and superficial relationships, so that we may seek truth boldly and love deep within our hearts.

May God bless us with holy *anger* at injustice, oppression, and exploitation of people, so that we may tirelessly work for justice, freedom, and peace among all people.

May God bless us with the gift of *tears* to shed for those who suffer from pain, rejection, starvation, or the loss of all that they cherish, so that we may reach out our hands to comfort them and transform their pain into joy.

May God bless us with enough *foolishness* to believe that we really can make a difference in this world, so that we are able, with God's grace, to do what others claim cannot be done.

Amen. Amen. Amen.