

Matthew 5:1-12 and 1 John 3:1-3

You are blessed when.....

I've been driving a hire car this week. There is one major difference between my car and this hire car and I've had to be very careful not to relax too much. Coming back from Bath on the motorway last night I had to keep reminding myself not to move the gear stick from 5th gear to 6th. Not only does this car not have a 6th gear (unlike my own car) but the position of reverse gear is in the place where I am used to putting my car when driving at speed. So far I have been sufficiently alert not to make the mistake.

Tom Wright describes the gospel reading this morning as Jesus taking the controls and making them work backwards. Chaos would ensue on our roads if we did that with cars. But Jesus is in the business of making us rethink the way the world works. He shows us that if we follow another way then we will come closer to making earth and heaven meet. Or if you like: to live in the present in a way that will make sense of God's promised future.

The gospel reading is the beginning of the long passage of teaching known as the Sermon on the Mount. It is commonly known as 'The Beatitudes' or blessings. Blessings that come from God. Jesus turns ordinary human ideas about happiness or blessing on its head. I think you would agree that the normal world view is that wonderful news consists of success, wealth, long life, victory in battle. And here Jesus is offering wonderful news for the humble, the poor, the mourners and the peacemakers. This passage became more personally more understandable when I read it in The Message where it is transcribed as 'You are blessed when you are.....' it is directed at each of us and not, for example to some group known as 'the poor'. Jesus is not just telling us to 'try hard to live like this'. It's not good advice – it's good news.

One of the ways to look at this set of 'blessings' is to divide them into two groups. The first group describes how we relate to God and the second group describes how we relate to each other

The first group then are those who are poor in spirit; those who mourn; those are meek and those who hunger and thirst for righteousness sake.

Those who are 'poor in spirit' have learned to depend on God and that is why they are blessed. The poor man in the Old Testament is one who looks to God for salvation; people with a contrite and humble spirit. You remember the Christmas Carol: In the Bleak Midwinter – telling of the gifts brought to Jesus that says: what can I give him, poor as I am? And the response is – give my heart. We have nothing else with which to 'buy the favour of heaven'.

Those who mourn: John Stott suggests that this could almost be written as 'happy are those who are unhappy'. And yet we know that so often those who mourn are not comforted. And that the Christian life can be one of sorrow. We acknowledge the times when we have fallen short and we grieve for the pain we have caused others. Perhaps we should also learn to weep more over the evil in the world; learn a Godly Grief. God's forgiveness brings comfort; pours oil on our wounds and brings peace to our consciences.

Those who are meek: gentle, humble, considerate, courteous and self-control are summed up in that word. But what does it look like? I can be very critical of myself and take those faults to God. But how do I feel if others see the same faults and point them out to me? How meek am I then? Am I defensive, discourteous?

Those who hunger and thirst for righteousness sake: Biblical righteousness encompasses three things – a right relationship with God, a moral righteousness of character and conduct and social righteousness – the promotion of justice, civil rights, integrity in business dealings and towards family. Will we have perpetual hunger or thirst? Maybe from time to time we will know what it feels like to be satisfied; but we can never rest on the laurels of past experience.

John Stott suggests there is a logic in the order of these four: we acknowledge our spiritual bankruptcy before God, then we mourn over the cause of it (the reign of sin in ourselves and the world), then we allow

that spiritual poverty to condition our behaviour by being meek (humble and gentle) towards others and then – and this is the point of confession – to hunger for righteousness.

The second group of blessings then relate to our response to others: being merciful, pure in heart, peacemakers and persecuted.

Mercy is compassion for people in need. The world is often merciless. There seems often to be rejoicing in the problems of others. We've always been a nation that is good at satire. But it seems to be coming a less kind place or perhaps a more cruel place. The Independent has a column called 'Why I hate...'. And then proceeds to pick apart a well known person. Blogs say in public the things that would never previously have seen the light of day and are often people trying to be clever at others expense. Instead, we can act generously, recognising that we have been forgiven and thus we too can forgive.

Purity of heart. I think this is about what I heard described recently as 'congruence'. The opposite of that phrase – 'do as I say, not do as I do'. It's where one lives one life and lives it entirely openly, with nothing to hide. Where your whole life is transparent to God and to others, including your thoughts and motives. This is a silly example, but I haven't bothered to get the kitchen light fixed since it broke last March. I've existed ok on a jury rig of a table lamp. However, autumn means I should wear a head torch to chop onions or risk losing a finger. Only now have I got round to finding an electrician. When I rather shamefacedly confessed this to people I thought were highly competent in the home management sphere I was relieved to find that I wasn't alone in letting things slide. But what sort of a mask am I wearing around other people – hiding things I'd rather they didn't know about?

Being a peacemaker: the cause of conflict is often intrigue or revenge or simply thinking one knows best and not being prepared to back down. Jesus asks us to pursue all that makes for peace. God is the divine author of peace and reconciliation. The peace of God is not peace at any price – it is not appeasement. It can be painful, requiring forgiveness, of listening, of acknowledging and losing prejudice, of seeking to understand another's point of view rather than just restating one's own.

Being persecuted for righteousness sake: Jesus tells us how we should respond – we should rejoice and be glad. Yikes. Often the instinct is to return anger with anger, or to sulk or be stoical. Our rejoicing though should be because we are suffering because we are being loyal to Jesus.

Like the first group, there is a flow to this group. Our relationship with God does not cause us to withdraw from the world, nor are we in some special way protected from all the things that life throws at us. Instead, we can be in the thick of things, seeking to be peacemakers, whilst not expecting thanks for our efforts! But in all of this we find that we are fulfilled.

I said at the beginning though that Jesus isn't just exhorting us to try hard! He is saying that the people who follow this teaching will be those who put the seasoning into life, who stop rot, who light up the way. By what they say and do and how they react they show the world something of what God himself is like. The blessings that we will receive if we follow will be immense. I think we will also be people who will give blessing – our lives will be a blessing to others.

John O'Donohue wrote *Benedictus* a beautiful book of blessings and he says: 'Perhaps we bless each other all the time without even realising it. When we show compassion or kindness to another we are setting blessing in train.'

If we want to live the lives that God wants from us then we have to be prepared to find that the controls aren't quite set out as we have come to expect. Maybe not quite as obviously different as between the layout of gears in my car and the hire car; but nevertheless distinctly different from the expectations of the world.

Sarah Thomas 30 October 2011