

Sermon 2 November 2014, All Saints Day

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

I used to hear the words of this morning's gospel as applying to someone else. Maybe it's the way it's written – blessed are those who..... Blessed are the poor in spirit.....When I discovered the interpretation in The Message – you are blessed when you are merciful..... then the words became alive, applicable to me, something to aspire to. I had something I could work with. But I've also come to realise that they sit within a particular context and are not just (or at all) about how to be good.

Jesus delivers them at the beginning of his ministry. And there is a parallel with the story of the Israelites, one that his listeners would have picked up. The people of Israel were in exile in Egypt. Moses leads them from there, across the Red Sea, where they spend many years in the wilderness during which at Mount Sinai God gives them the 10 commandments and the laws. Eventually they enter the promised land. Jesus too leaves Egypt, he is baptised in the River Jordan, spends time in the wilderness and now delivers this sermon on the mount, where he describes a 'new kingdom'.

What is the first thing he tells them about this new kingdom? Well, it's not about how to be good or how to get to heaven. It's not about power. It is about 'turning the world upside down'. And doing so now, today, and everyday. And these beatitudes are all about being part of the new kingdom of God, how to be part of the mending of the world and its people.

I find it helpful, as well as turning the phrase into 'you are blessed when you are poor in spirit', to look at what the outcome is. Looking at the gospel reading on the sheet

'Blessed are the poor in spirit, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven. So, those who long for God's kingdom must recognise that it belongs to those who are poor in spirit.

'Blessed are those who mourn, for they will be comforted. That the healing of old wounds does not come through inflicting wounds on others but through the consolation of mourning.

'Blessed are the meek, for they will inherit the earth. Really?

'Blessed are those who hunger and thirst for righteousness, for they will be filled. What if anything do we do about physical hunger?

'Blessed are the merciful, for they will receive mercy. That justice is not about vengeance, instead it is about humility and mercy is reserved for the merciful.

'Blessed are the pure in heart, for they will see God. 'Blessed are the peacemakers, for they will be called children of God. God is a peacemaker and so those who copy God will be peacemakers.

'Blessed are those who are persecuted for righteousness' sake, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven.

Jesus is addressing the question of how to be faithful to God in a time of stress and ambiguity and his answer is a bracing one and acknowledges that this is not the way of the

world. And it's one that Christians are often laughed at for attempting, and we at times will mock ourselves for. It's one we often fail at too.

So what are we able to do in response? When we are wronged do we look for vengeance in some way? Or are we compassionate towards those who want to hurt us?

Take meekness for example.

I've read that meekness actually is a pretty strong word. It's not that doormat, shrinking violet sort of a word we often take it for. Try this for size. Meekness is having a true view of yourself. If you are meek you will be amazed that God and others think of you as well as they do. And the response to that makes you gentle, humble, sensitive and patient when dealing with others. The worldview expects such people to be trampled underfoot, after all it is the tough, the overbearing to appear to succeed, but God says otherwise.

There's a back page interview in the Church Times, this week David Whyte a poet, biologist and philosopher is interviewed. He describes the Sermon on the Mount as 'sheer, single-malt compassion, a profound invitation, and pure unalloyed poetry. 'Blessed are the poor in spirit'. It makes no sense; it turns the world upside down. It is pure invitational brilliance'.

So, we answer that invitation. Do we pick and choose which 'blessing' we might aspire to? Well, no, these are all marks of someone who follows Jesus. For we should never be fully satisfied. We don't just mourn our past sin, we also long for future righteousness, and we do so now. And we don't live in isolation from society and the pain of the world.

We come on our knees before God, we acknowledge our spiritual poverty and mourn over it. That in turn helps make us meek and gentle in our relationships with others. Through it we long to grow in grace and goodness.

And yet, how many times does that just seem to be impossible?

Francis Spufford, has written a fast and furious account of his understanding of his faith. Called 'Unapologetic', it is subtitled – 'why, despite everything, Christianity can still make surprising emotional sense'. He describes what he calls 'the human propensity to mess things up', well he doesn't actually use the word mess. Our active inclination is to break things, relationships, people, stuff. Why will we be both tender and angry with those we love the most? Why does it seem impossible to live in accordance with the way Jesus outlines?

I'm going finish by reading part of his response to Jesus death and resurrection.

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Let us look to be mended by God, and to be part of bringing mending into the lives of others.

Amen.

