

The Beatitudes

The sermon given at the BCP Communion Service, on 3rd November 2019 by the Vicar, the Revd. Canon Jonathan Baker, in Beverley Minster.

Matthew 5:1-12

There is a film from the 1950s called 'The Sound Barrier' about test pilots who first flew faster than the speed of sound. It tells the story of scientists and engineers developing jet engines of enormous power and speed, but none knew what would happen when aircraft passed the magic speed of 735mph.

In the film, various pilots did fly planes at faster than the speed of sound but with tragic consequences. Planes disintegrated or spun out of control: it seemed that the flight controls did not work properly at such high speeds.

At the climax the hero, himself a test pilot, works out with a counter-intuitive flash of insight, that as planes accelerate through the sound barrier, so their controls start to work backwards. So in order to fly safely at that speed, the pilot has to do the opposite of what he would normally do.

With great daring, our hero puts his theory to the test and as his aeroplane reaches the speed of sound, at the critical moment instead of pulling the joystick back, he pushes it forward and instead of spinning down out of control, the plane rose up and flew on, free and faster than anyone had ever flown before.

It is of course complete nonsense. In reality, that is not what happens to an aircraft when it passes the speed of sound, so don't try this at home children.

Nevertheless, it makes a cracking story. It's as if part of us wants to believe in a deeper reality which is the complete opposite of how things are on the surface.

That takes into the territory of the Christian Gospel, where Jesus sits at the controls and appears to be working them backwards. Nowhere do we see that more clearly than in this collection of sayings known as Beatitudes. The Beatitudes offer us a version of the good life, the life that is blessed, which is the complete opposite of what you would

expect – it is the poor, the meek, the merciful who are blessed, rather than the rich, the assertive or those who insist on their rights.

What Jesus is doing here isn't an ethical command – he's not telling people how to live. Neither is he promising them something in the future. He's declaring God's blessing upon certain categories of people here and now, in a way that helps us to see their qualities in a new and more positive light. And that may help us better to understand certain things in our own lives.

The Beatitudes are profoundly paradoxical. Jesus is turning the standards of the world upside down and in the process telling us that God's values are very different from the values most people live by in practise. Maybe that's why so many people's lives, like the aircraft in the film, reach a certain speed and then become unstable, and risk disintegration or spinning out of control. We've been equipped with the wrong values to live well.

But Jesus is saying that it is those who are poor in worldly terms, those thought of as lost souls, who are the truly fortunate ones, the blessed, who have every reason to rejoice and exult in the midst of suffering. Jesus is echoing the insight of Mary in the Magnificat who realises that God is the one who exalts the humble and meek, but puts down the mighty from their seat; who fills the hungry with good things but sends the rich empty away; who has mercy on them that fear him, but scatters the proud in the imagination of their hearts.

The topsy turvy nature of the Gospel presented by Jesus in the Beatitudes is reflected especially by Paul, who [in 2 Corinthians 6:8-10] says "We are treated as imposters, and yet are true; as unknown, and yet well known; as dying, and behold we live; as punished and yet not killed; as having nothing, and yet possessing everything". Paul's life is a kind of case study, testing the truth of the Beatitudes.

The same could be said of the lives of many of the saints, which is why we have this reading on All Saints Sunday. If we think of the life of St Francis of Assisi or Edith Stein or Mother Teresa or Oscar Romero, we see particular instances of the Beatitudes being lived out, and a richer, more authentic humanity revealed.

Of course the reason why the Beatitudes reveal a true humanity is because these describe the qualities and values of Jesus himself, the Son of Man, the perfect human being who reveals to us what it means to live as the creator intended.

Jesus is a man of poverty, who has nowhere to lay his head. He is the one who invites us to come to him because he is meek and lowly of heart. He is the one who is pure of heart and so unceasingly beholds God. He is the peacemaker, suffering to reconcile the world to God. In John's Gospel, the cross is presented as the place of glory - where Jesus empties himself and submits to death, there he is lifted up and exalted and enthroned. And we are invited into communion with him on that basis.

So the Beatitudes are challenging. And we may be wondering, can this be right? Is this really the path to fullness of life? And plenty of people, plenty of ideologies, have profoundly disagreed. Plenty of people today see poverty as somehow self-inflicted, the result of some kind of laziness or lack of application; plenty see meekness simply as an opportunity to exploit other people; plenty see hunger and thirst for righteousness as an excuse for bureaucratic regulation and red tape, a restriction on opportunities to make money; plenty mistake mercy for gullibility or weakness. As I look around at the politics and values of our own day, I see those forces and values of anti-Beatitude very much in the driving seat and driving us forward at increasing speed.

But the Beatitudes stand opposed to our superficial appetites for money and security and independence. The Beatitudes are a call to conversion, to a different way of looking at things. They demand we inwardly turn around to go in the opposite direction from the one we would spontaneously like to go in. But this U-turn brings what is pure and noble to the fore. it takes us closer towards Jesus and not further away from him.

The Beatitudes are an invitation to closer communion and it is as we come to the Lord's Table, meekly kneeling on our knees, holding out empty hands, conscious of our spiritual poverty, that the Lord comes to us, to 'work the controls backwards', to take us to a place of deeper humanity and authenticity, filling us with his grace, lifting us up to fly free and faster and true, more true than we had believed possible.

*Almighty God, in Christ you make all things new:
transform the poverty of our nature by the riches of your grace,
and in the renewal of our lives make known your heavenly glory
through Jesus Christ our Lord, who is alive and reigns with you
in the unity of the Holy Spirit, One God, now and forever.*

Reading Texts

Matthew 5:1-12

¹ When Jesus saw the crowds, he went up the mountain; and after he sat down, his disciples came to him. ² Then he began to speak, and taught them, saying: ³ "Blessed are the poor in spirit, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven. ⁴ "Blessed are those who mourn, for they will be comforted. ⁵ "Blessed are the meek, for they will inherit the earth. ⁶ "Blessed are those who hunger and thirst for righteousness, for they will be filled. ⁷ "Blessed are the merciful, for they will receive mercy. ⁸ "Blessed are the pure in heart, for they will see God. ⁹ "Blessed are the peacemakers, for they will be called children of God. ¹⁰ "Blessed are those who are persecuted for righteousness' sake, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven. ¹¹ "Blessed are you when people revile you and persecute you and utter all kinds of evil against you falsely on my account. ¹² Rejoice and be glad, for your reward is great in heaven, for in the same way they persecuted the prophets who were before you.