

# The Beatitudes...

## *... Jesus is doing a 'New Thing'*

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*A sermon given on All Saint's Day, 1st November 2020, by the Curate, the Revd Professor Tim Kelly, in the Minster.*

*Matthew 5:1-12.*

Today's gospel reading captures Jesus words from the beginning of the Sermon on the Mount, commonly known as the Beatitudes. I recently read a suggested form of beatitudes for our COVID-19 times:

*Blessed are those who stay at home. They not only keep themselves safe, they also help keep others safe and take the pressure off of strained NHS; they shall be called 'curve-flatterners'.*

*Blessed are the ones who must work as nurses and doctors, ambulance workers, teachers, grocery store workers, police officers, firefighters and others. They often put themselves and their families in danger; they are more than heroes; they are angels in disguise.*

*Blessed are those who wear a mask and stay apart from others when they go out. They are demonstrating unselfishness.*

*Blessed are the volunteers who work at food banks and give blood and make masks and do whatever they can for the common good. They shall be called saints.*

*Blessed are those who check on their neighbours and especially the elderly, they become an urgent contact with the world for those most in need. They are living the gospel.*

*Blessed are the scientists who tell us the truth about what is safe, who are working day and night under massive levels of pressure to find treatments and vaccines to end this plague. They do the work of God in laboratories.*

*Blessed are the ones who use humour to lighten the anxiety for us all. They are bringers of peace.*

*Blessed are those who join worship online. They are proclaiming that the church is not a building; they are proclaiming that we remain together in spirit.*

*Blessed are those who pray. As they pray for the sick and for the grieving, they remind us that each of those numbers in the statistics are broken hearts; they acknowledge that our God is stronger than this virus and they reassure us that it will end and God will have the final word.*

Now, I'm sure many of you would agree with those statements. However, without taking away from the truth of those statements, there is a key difference in what Jesus is saying, especially in the first couple of verses. He's not just declaring a list of who the good people are, upon whom blessings will be showered. Instead he is declaring how there is 'good news' in the midst of 'bad news'. There is transformation, there is hope in the darkness. I don't know about you, but after last night's news and the need for another month-long lockdown, good news can feel in short supply. In one translation of today's reading, the word 'blessed' is translated as 'wonderful news'.

So, for example, rather than as we've just heard it, 'Blessed are the poor in spirit, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven', we can read this as, 'Wonderful news for the poor in spirit - the Kingdom of Heaven is yours'. Wonderful news, but perhaps where you least expect it: in the depths; for the poor in spirit; for those who mourn. Perhaps you, least expect 'wonderful news' on this particular wet Sunday in November. Jesus's words notably span the gap between the reality of what currently 'is' and the declaration, the new covenant, of how things 'will be'. In describing how things currently are, these words have the potential to speak to us in the midst of difficult times.

Let me ask you, do you feel poor in spirit today? If I'm honest, it's hard for me to feel particularly buoyant at the news of a month-long lockdown. This isn't necessarily because of my own situation, but I'm anxious for those whose health is particularly at risk as the COVID-19 rate soars; I'm fearful for those whose jobs and livelihoods are further hit hard by the necessary closures; I'm concerned for those who will have to keep working over the next few weeks; those who will work to keep the rest of us functioning and healthy. Now I'm naturally a problem-solver, but when faced with insoluble problems, my brain can endlessly spin with thoughts and challenges that cannot easily be resolved. My head hurts and my energy reserves are depleted. I personally find it easy to relate to the Message Bible's interpretation of the verse, which reads, 'You're blessed when you're at the end of your rope: with less of you, there is more of God and his rule.'

The current situation certainly takes me to that place. The current situation reminds me that I am not in control. Instead, I have to throw all my trust, not on my own self-

sufficiencies or abilities, but onto God. Being poor in our spirit, but strong in his, Jesus tells us that what may be perceived as failure and weakness in the world's eyes is success in God's eyes - the Kingdom of Heaven is ours.

There has been plenty to mourn also in recent times. As Wendy said, this afternoon our recorded memorial service goes out for all those who have lost loved ones in the past year. Many haven't been able to say the 'goodbyes' that they would have wanted. And in a myriad of other ways, many of us are mourning small losses of meeting with friends and family, of cancelled holidays, of cancelled hospital appointments or operations, cancelled school exams, the loss of a normal start to university life, or simply freely being able to visit relatives in care homes. There have been so many losses - for many, we're just mourning normality.

But Jesus is telling us that those who are mourning, their losses will be comforted: our loss is recognised; our loss isn't disregarded; the pain of loss will be comforted. The wisdom of the world would tell us that fortune favours the bold or, if you want something, you've got to go out there and grab it. Jesus instead tells us that those who are meek, which at this present time might include those who feel far from bold, but instead perhaps are feeling vulnerable and feeling exposed, they are the ones that will inherit the earth. And I find these to be comforting words where we may see the inequalities growing between rich and poor and the gaps between groups in our nation are getting bigger, there is an end to this. In fact, this is Jesus's declaration. His words mark the beginning of the end. There is light at the end of the tunnel. Jesus doesn't shy away from acknowledging the present difficulties, but declares how things will be.

But you might ask, when will this be? Are we just being sold the promise of jam tomorrow? Well, the clue that this is not Jesus's intention can be found in the very next part of the gospel of Matthew, where Jesus teaches the disciples to pray the Lord's Prayer, in which we pray that God's kingdom will come and his will be done on this earth as well as in heaven.

The life where God is already king is to become 'this life', that we are living here and now; the future is being dragged into the present; we are being encouraged to take hold of these declarations that are being made over us and in the later verses of today's reading, to live as Jesus intended us to live, to be peacemakers, to be merciful, to hunger and thirst for righteousness.

We who have seen and heard the hope in the darkness, are called to 'be' the hope in the midst of the darkness. The Beatitudes remind us that in the middle of the mess we see all around us, Jesus was and is already doing a new thing.

More than that, we are being called to join in and be part of this transformation. In a world where many are understandably fearful, Jesus's words are an invitation for us to claim his promises and to speak and act in a way that reveals that we know of a love, God's love, the basis of our sure and certain hope that can cast out all fear.

# Reading Text

Matthew 5:1-12

<sup>1</sup> When Jesus saw the crowds, he went up the mountain; and after he sat down, his disciples came to him. <sup>2</sup> Then he began to speak, and taught them, saying:

<sup>3</sup> 'Blessed are the poor in spirit, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven.

<sup>4</sup> 'Blessed are those who mourn, for they will be comforted.

<sup>5</sup> 'Blessed are the meek, for they will inherit the earth.

<sup>6</sup> 'Blessed are those who hunger and thirst for righteousness, for they will be filled.

<sup>7</sup> 'Blessed are the merciful, for they will receive mercy.

<sup>8</sup> 'Blessed are the pure in heart, for they will see God.

<sup>9</sup> 'Blessed are the peacemakers, for they will be called children of God.

<sup>10</sup> 'Blessed are those who are persecuted for righteousness' sake, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven.

<sup>11</sup> 'Blessed are you when people revile you and persecute you and utter all kinds of evil against you falsely on my account. <sup>12</sup> Rejoice and be glad, for your reward is great in heaven, for in the same way they persecuted the prophets who were before you.