

## Lent Compline Talks 2018 St Mary's Kidlington

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### The Beatitudes 1 Introduction and Context

This Lent, Bishop Stephen has asked us to consider the Beatitudes and he has written a Pilgrim Way pamphlet on it. Accordingly, I will use this first compline to introduce the Beatitudes and their place in the “Sermon on the Mount” and then - each week - consider the beatitudes one by one and their relevance for our lives today.

The beatitudes are one of the most familiar portions of the Gospel and they come in both Matthew and Luke at the start of their discourses on Jesus’ teaching. According to William Barclay, that great Scottish interpreter of the bible, Matthew’s gospel was written first and foremost for the Jews, a people steeped in the oral Hebrew tradition; to convince the Jews that all the old testament prophecies are fulfilled in Jesus and that he is, therefore, the Messiah. Matthew’s gospel is primarily a “teaching” gospel. Having covered the descent and birth of Jesus, little is said about his early years until his baptism, arguably when Jesus realises that his active ministry must start. This is followed by Jesus’ temptation when Jesus is shown rejecting methods in his ministry he knew to be against the will of God.

Anyone who undertakes a great task needs helpers, so both gospels next have the call to the apostles most of whom were local fishermen and probably illiterate, but Matthew as a hated tax official was certainly literate. Helpers and assistants all need instruction from the leader and so both Matthew and Luke place the Sermon on the Mount at the start of that teaching. It’s been called by some “The ordination address of the twelve apostles”.

However, it seems very unlikely that the text we have now was one sermon preached on a single occasion. There is far too much of it! Although now we can sit and read it quietly with pauses for thought, it would be quite indigestible as a single spoken narrative. In reality it is a summary of all the sermons that Jesus ever preached. And as such it is a striking proclamation of the Kingdom, turning on its head much of the accepted wisdom of the world.

What was the accepted wisdom of Jesus’ time? The Jews were under a ruthless Roman occupation and there were four major religious groups, all with different views. Pharisees demanded strict observance of the Mosaic law in the Torah, but also accepted the oral tradition of Jewish customs and rituals. Sadducees were from priestly families; they accepted the Law of Moses but rejected oral tradition and, unlike the Pharisees, also rejected resurrection of the dead. The monastic Essenes awaited a Messiah that would establish a religious Kingdom on earth. The Zealots were a militant group, centred in Galilee, whose main aim was freedom from Roman rule.

Jesus had moved from Nazareth to Capernaum on the lakeside; one of the great thoroughfares through Israel. He was attracting great crowds from as far away as Jerusalem. Jesus saw the crowds coming to him, so went up a hillside and sat down. Rabbis always sat when giving official teaching. But Matthew makes it clear that the teaching was primarily to the disciples, not the crowds “Seeing the crowds, Jesus went up the mountain and when he sat down, his disciples came to him, and he opened his mouth and taught them”. So, we can picture this small group of disciples, gathered round the seated Jesus, listening intently. Then come what we call ‘the Beatitudes’

Depending on the translation each starts “Blessed are ...” or “How blessed are...” “Happy are ...” The original Greek “*Makarios*” implies a blessedness or “happiness” that is sufficient to itself, complete, and the first taste of life eternal. The beatitudes are therefore very different to the law of Moses with its predominance of “thou shalt not”, and also very different from much of the wisdom of the world which places emphasis on strength, on getting things, and getting one’s own way. The ‘happiness’ is not that of the so-called ‘happy hour’ at the pub, nor the temporary happiness that comes from a wonderful experience or gift. It is that deep enduring happiness that comes from knowing that one has done the right thing, often for others, whatever the cost. The Beatitudes reveal the goal of human existence, addressed to each person individually and to the church as a whole.

At first sight the Beatitudes appear difficult, contradictory, soppy - “small comforts to big problems”. It is not difficult to imagine the reaction of those first disciples. ‘You must be joking’ (in Aramaic) would I think have been Simon the Zealot’s response to “blessed are the peacemakers”; or Peter ‘But It’s the Romans not the meek who have inherited the earth’. Clearly, we shall have to look well below the surface of the words to find their true meaning.

And what of the rewards, which form the second part of each saying? What the Beatitudes are saying is NOT ‘however difficult it is on earth, the reward is in heaven’ “pie in the sky”, although they do promise eternal salvation. None of us know what heaven will be like apart from a profound sense of being with God. Nor, I think, is Jesus saying “here is an ideal that no-one can achieve”. Although the Beatitudes offers a foretaste of heaven; following Christ and his teaching can bring us true, deep happiness, blessedness, in this mortal life.

The Beatitudes, then, are revolutionary; the antithesis of conventional wisdom and common sense. They aren’t just rhetoric but apply to every aspect of life. They teach us not just to be ‘at peace’ but how to ‘be peace’, to be ‘blessed’, how to be truly ‘happy’.

*Blessed are the poor in spirit, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven.*

*Blessed are they who mourn, for they shall be comforted.*

*Blessed are the meek, for they shall inherit the earth.*

*Blessed are they who hunger and thirst for righteousness, for they shall be satisfied.*

*Blessed are the merciful, for they shall obtain mercy.*

*Blessed are the pure of heart, for they shall see God.*

*Blessed are the peacemakers, for they shall be called children of God.*

*Blessed are they who are persecuted for the sake of righteousness, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven.*

