

## Lent Compline Talks 2018 St Mary's Kidlington

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### The Beatitudes

#### 2: "Blessed are the poor in spirit, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven."

Last week we looked at the overall context of the beatitudes and their place in the 'Sermon on the Mount'. Today we turn to the first of them - and whichever translation we read there are two slightly different versions: either "Blessed are **the poor**, for theirs is the Kingdom of God" in Luke; or in Matthew "Blessed are **the poor in spirit** for theirs is the kingdom of heaven".

The essential difference is in the first part; the reward, the kingdom of heaven is the same in both. In Luke it is "the poor" that are blessed, but in Matthew it is "the poor in spirit". It is argued that Luke's "the poor" is the original, on the basis both that it is simpler and that, in the area at the time of Christ, there was the concept that God would intervene on behalf of the poor and weak to change their fortunes for the better. Did not Jesus tell his followers to pray "Give us today our daily bread"? - a very direct request for food. This line of thought argues that "the poor in spirit" in Matthew represents a subsequent "spiritualising" of the beatitudes and we shall see the same in a later beatitude (in Luke "Blessed are you who hunger" but in Matthew "Blessed are you who hunger and thirst after righteousness").

So, let's start with what may have been the earliest version "Blessed are the poor". It is very clear that Jesus devoted his mission of teaching and preaching primarily to the common people, most of whom were poor, not to the rich and powerful religious leaders of the time. It was, in fact, the religious leaders who often came to him to question him about his teaching. At the start of his ministry we read that, immediately after his temptation and "armed with the power of the spirit", Jesus attended worship in the synagogue in Nazareth as was his custom and stood up to read the lesson; he was handed the scroll of the prophet Isaiah. Luke tells us that Jesus "opened the scroll and found the passage which says "The spirit of the Lord is upon me because he has anointed me; he has sent me to announce the good news **to the poor**". In other words, Jesus specifically selected that text. Moreover, Jesus went on to say "Today this scripture is fulfilled in your hearing". Certainly, the people in Nazareth were very poor in terms of possessions and in any sort of social power. Modern archaeology suggests that many lived a rather troglodyte existence in caves. They had few possessions, no power and little hope. Whereas Isaiah prophesied freedom from their historic bondage to the people of his time, Jesus fulfils the prophesy by bringing the good news of his gospel. But that doesn't mean that, provided we talk about the good news, we can ignore material poverty which affects increasing numbers in our own country and millions more around the world. Even if Jesus said "the poor you have with you always" this does not absolve those of us who claim to follow his teachings if we ignore the material poverty of others - indeed it is our Christ given duty to ensure that all have the basic standards of life in the context of our own day. "By their fruits -

their actions, ye shall know them”. That is, for me, the over-riding tragedy of the current problems that organisations like Oxfam find themselves in. With many withdrawing their funding and the government preventing them from applying for funds until they have cleaned the Augean stables created by a few individuals, the poor that they serve can presumably whistle for aid! Sadly, the people and governments who, to a certain extent through restrictive trade agreements are part of the cause of the poverty are more concerned with their own image than with the desperately poor people who the vast majority of staff in the charity organisations serve selflessly and tirelessly.

Although now when we use the word “poor” we think primarily in terms of finances or possessions, it is clear that Jesus did not promise to make the poor rich in terms of earthly possessions or power (though some misinterpreted his message as bringing freedom from the oppression of the Romans), but he did fulfil their deepest spiritual need. So, we must now think of our ‘poverty’ in a second way. Hence Matthew’s use of “the poor in spirit” reflecting the fact that Jesus was also speaking about spiritual poverty. What do we mean by that? It is humbleness before God. It is not the faux humility of Uriah Heep in Dickens David Copperfield. His “I’m ever so ‘umble” was obsequiousness and moreover was insincere. The spiritual poverty to which Matthew and many others refer is not insincere, but is the true humility of those who understand their place in comparison to the goodness, righteousness and majesty of God. As we noted last week, Matthew is always keen to relate Jesus’ teaching to the Old Testament and to show how Jesus is the culmination of the prophecies. So, if we go back to Proverbs we find there a list of the things that God hates - and the first is “haughty eyes” or “arrogance” - we can therefore immediately see why Matthew spoke of “Blessed are the poor in spirit”. “Poor in spirit” is a positive, not a negative attribute, because it is a lack of haughtiness and arrogance before God. Poverty of spirit is very appropriate for Lent when we have confessed and repented with deep contrition, and come to Jesus as sinners, lacking in arrogance, self-righteousness, and self-sufficiency. The positive gift of this is that, being freed of our own pretensions, we become open to God. That sort of humility itself brings an inner peace “blessedness”, giving us strength to do the will of God. In that sense everyone who wishes to enter the kingdom must be “spiritually poor” because salvation is the gift of God through Jesus Christ.

And now we come to the reward, which in each beatitude is set against each “Blessed are the ...” statement. In this case the reward is “for theirs is the kingdom of heaven”. At first sight as we noted last week it does seem to be the embodiment of a “pie in the sky” approach to religion. In reality it is far from that. Certainly, Jesus did not promise to make the poor rich in earthly material goods or power. Indeed, such things can themselves be stumbling blocks. Provided we have a basic minimum and are not actually in want of food or shelter, it is very clear that increasing possessions do not bring increasing contentment or joy - except on a very temporary and ephemeral level. Rather it seems that, like any addiction, by concentrating our sense of reward on things or consumables, or power, humans tend to want more and more of those. As Jesus said “It is easier for a camel to pass through the needle’s eye than for a rich man to enter into the kingdom of God” (incidentally the “eye of a needle was either the name of a very narrow low gate in Jerusalem; or ‘camel’ is an early mistranslation of a similar

word 'rope'). If you stop and think of those who you know who most intensely radiate a sense of blessedness in this world, they are not the rich or the powerful; often they are those with very few material possessions. The materially poor and rich must equally be humbly aware of their need of God in order to be part of the kingdom.

But the blessing isn't just that "all will be OK after you die and go to heaven". Jesus had a very real sense of inaugurating the kingdom of God on earth. "Jesus was confident that the goodness of the Father would establish itself in his kingly rule, and that this process began there and then in first century Palestine" (Theissen & Merz in 'The Historical Jesus'). The kingdom of God on earth, then, is the kingdom of the spirit which results from the outworking of the ministry of Jesus. This is the challenge to us, as Christians who accept Jesus's message. If we are to be a part of the kingdom we must behave in a way that shows that we truly take in what that means, not only for ourselves cultivating true "poorness of spirit" (humility), but also for others. That means doing all we can, either by direct giving and action or through the social and political avenues open to us, to ensure that the poor are blessed in this world by having their basic needs met, and by being given a voice. The new Oxford Winter Night Shelter for the homeless organised by our central churches is a good example of the church living Christ's message to be a blessing to the poor.