

Lent Compline Talks 2018

St Mary's Kidlington

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Compline, March 4th

The Beatitudes

3: Blessed are they that mourn

In the second beatitude we read in Matthew “Blessed are they that mourn: for they shall be comforted”; or in Luke “Blessed are you that weep now: for you shall laugh”.

As last week, we have two slightly different versions, but here it is the second ‘reward’ part of the beatitude that is rather different. ‘Being comforted’ suggests having the pain of the mourning reduced although it is still there; “laughing” suggests an even more positive outcome - indeed a reversal of the mourning/weeping. The ‘reward’ seems to be in an unspecified future: “they SHALL be comforted”; “you SHALL laugh”.

Let’s start with the first part - ‘blessed are they that mourn or weep’. In today’s world we use both those words in one particular way. We mourn the death of a loved person; we weep when such a death occurs and also when something happens to us that makes us very sad. In both cases it is something external to ourselves that causes the mourning or the weeping. Also, we think of mourning as rather prolonged - for example “Mrs X never got over the loss of her husband ...”; whereas weeping is usually more acute and more short-lived. Jesus knew all these pains. He wept at the tomb of Lazarus but also for the state of humanity; coming to Jerusalem “he beheld the city and wept over it” saying “if you had only known the way to peace”.

We noted last week that Matthew was particularly keen to show how Jesus fulfils the old testament prophesies. The Isaiah text that Jesus chose to read in the synagogue promises that the Messiah will come “to heal the broken-hearted ... to comfort all who mourn ... to give them garlands for ashes; the oil of joy for mourning” - this second beatitude is almost literally a paraphrase of that prophesy. Jesus’s Galilean hearers would have had plenty to mourn and weep about in addition to the losses that afflict us now; their subjugation by the Romans and their own rulers. When Jesus announced the arrival of the kingdom “Today, this scripture is fulfilled”, maybe in part he saw the Kingdom as freedom from Roman rule - others hearing him certainly did - but for Jesus the concept was much broader.

In many cases the mourning/weeping is really for OUR OWN pain or loss caused by some external event, that has made US unhappy. It is WE who are broken-hearted. If we take the example of the death of a well-loved family member or friend; is it not for THEM that we weep (particularly if we believe Jesus’ promises), but rather for ourselves. If that is the case, how then can it be called a ‘blessing’? And it could seem even more contradictory if we substitute “happy” for “blessed”.

Here, I suggest, we should look beyond mourning or weeping for our loss of something external. The other thing that we should be mourning or weeping about is internal - our own failings when we compare our attempts to live a Christian life with the model we have in our Lord. Indeed, if we are humble (here we are back to the first beatitude) and appreciate that all our gifts and blessings come from God, this can only produce mourning

and regret over our own failings and the sins of this world. Further, if we have real empathy, we must also mourn for the suffering of others.

Both John the Baptist and Jesus put a great deal of stress on repentance for our failings and before we can repent, we have to be truly sorry for - mourn or weep - those failings. Isaiah expected 'tears of contrition' for our failings. St. Gregory puts it this way: 'the more we understand what it means to come closer to God, who is divine truth, beauty, and goodness, the more we realize the poverty of human nature, and we can only mourn our present condition'.

So now we come to the reward half of the beatitude: they shall be comforted or happy. Comforted in our immediate pain - yes, of course. That deep knowledge that we are loved by our Lord and in the words of Hildegard of Bingen "all shall be well, and all manner of things shall be well" is certainly a great comfort in times of loss and sadness if we can only lift our eyes from our own pain. Indeed, another word we use for the Holy Spirit is "the comforter", and that applies in this world as in the next. Isaiah says that the comfort would come because the Messiah would save people from their sins, the cause of their mourning. So, in this context, mourning is a blessing because it creates in us a desire to live more Christ-like lives, thereby avoiding the pain caused by sin. For mourning to be 'in the faith', it will be a mourning not just for the suffering and sadness of life, but for the sinfulness that causes it.

But what about "happy". That word does not seem to capture all that is intended by the text, primarily because today's use of the word 'happy' has devalued it somewhat "I was happy today because I got a letter from a friend ... because my premium bond came up." Insert a phrase of your own choice. True, deep, lasting happiness is the *inner* joy and peace that transcends what happens in the world around us, a happiness comes from being right with God.

And, although the reward in this beatitude is expressed in the future, that future is available now, through faith in our Lord, and not just in the kingdom of heaven. None of us knows what heaven will be like but, when we are more truly with our Lord than we can be here and now, we can be certain that there will be no more pain, no more death that now causes mourning and weeping "and God shall wipe away all tears from their eyes". But more than that, the reward requires action: Jesus teaches us that we must embrace pain and tears when they come in the confidence that joy will follow. Jesus wept over Lazarus, but then he raised him. We, too, are called to relieve suffering and its causes; to do all we can to "wipe away the tears" from the eyes of those we know to be suffering.