

## Lent Compline Talks 2018 St Mary's Kidlington

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### The Beatitudes

**5: Blessed are they that hunger & thirst after righteousness for they shall be filled.**

Once again, if we compare the authorised version of this beatitude in Matthew that is most familiar “Blessed are they that hunger & thirst after righteousness for they shall be filled” with that in Luke we note an apparently striking difference because Luke has “Blessed are you that hunger now, for you shall be filled”

The difference is just as stark in the New English Bible translation: in Matthew we read “Blessed are those who hunger and thirst to see right prevail; they shall be satisfied” and in Luke “Blessed are you who now go hungry; your hunger shall be satisfied”. The beatitude in Luke is again much simpler and more straightforward, and textual criticism suggests that this is likely to have been the original version, so let’s start there, bearing in mind all the time that Jesus’ mission was to establish and proclaim the kingdom of God.

In Jesus’ time in Israel, hunger must have been fairly commonplace for the poor to whom Jesus primarily directed his mission. Both thirst and hunger are bodily sensations that ensure that our fundamental requirements for food and water are satisfied, and they are therefore enormously powerful drives to human behaviour. In times of food shortage, people will try to eat almost anything to assuage their hunger. Jesus was well aware of people’s need for food. Two examples will suffice: in The Lord’s Prayer he teaches us to say “Give us this day our daily bread”; and we have only to think of Jesus’ words when he went up into the hills and the crowds flocked to him for healing. He called his disciples and said “I feel sorry for all these people; they have been with me for three days and have nothing to eat - I don’t want to send them away hungry”. I don’t need to continue the story of the feeding of the 5000 for you as it is so well known. Whether this was a physical miracle in terms of the 5 loaves and two fishes or - as has been suggested - more a miracle of changes of heart as the people who had actually brought food for themselves (they weren’t fools) now shared it with others, we shall never know. According to Luke, Jesus continues with an anti-beatitude “Alas for you who are well fed now; you shall go hungry”. Jesus may have been thinking of the well-fed priests, officials and Roman administrators of his day. For us, in 20<sup>th</sup> century Britain obesity is a greater threat than hunger for most, although the rise of food banks is evidence of great inequality in our nation and many in the world do not have enough to eat. If, then, we are to bring nearer the kingdom of God in our time we need to work very hard to ensure that the hungry in our own land, and the millions of hungry around the world, will be “filled” or “satisfied”. So, let’s hang on to the implications of a very direct beatitude concerning physical hunger, and we will return to it.

Interestingly, in almost every commentary I read, there was little mention of physical hunger, and the emphasis was all on Matthew’s “hunger and thirst after righteousness”. Let’s turn to that now. As we saw earlier, Matthew similarly ‘spiritualises’ this beatitude and, rather than Jesus satisfying the very material hunger and food in this life, looks instead to a festal meal in “the kingdom” - the “heavenly banquet”. At the last supper Jesus says of the wine “I shall not drink again of the fruit of the vine until I drink it new with you in my father’s kingdom.

It seems to me immaterial whether 'my father's kingdom' refers to the hearts and minds of people in this life or to souls in heaven. Indeed, we pray daily "Your kingdom come; your will be done on earth as it is in heaven". The 'righteousness' of the beatitude is the fulfilment of God's will in our heart and soul here and now. It is not just observance of God's laws and a longing for forgiveness and personal rightness with God, but a passionate expression of Christ's command to "love our neighbour as ourselves", and we must "hunger and thirst" toward that with the same sort of passion and intensity as if we were starving. Indeed, St. Augustine called the Beatitudes the ideal for every Christian life!

Another word for 'righteousness' is 'justice'. We certainly desire justice for ourselves when we feel we have been wronged. But here we must think about social righteousness, justice; justice in a world that is unrighteous and unjust; where there are untold examples of the powerful oppressing the weak. We should passionately seek justice for all. That takes courage and as individuals and as the church we don't often find courage easy. However, the church should be both a foretaste and an instrument of the kingdom; a way for God to bring about change in the world. This will involve loving service through voluntary work, and working for justice through our daily tasks, in our engagement with local and national government and through international movements and campaigns. We are all for righteousness and justice - how then can we become more intense in this desire? This is surely the work of the Holy Spirit, guiding our lives, as we progress on our lifelong spiritual journey. But that journey needs to show fruits in this world - "by their fruits ye shall know them", and that is where the two versions of this beatitude are really saying the same thing, whereas at first sight they may have appeared very different; Matthew doesn't change but actually extends it.

It is quite literally a part of our God-given task to do all we can to ensure that those who are physically hungry are fed with physical food and not starving. And that is just one part of our task to work passionately against all sorts of wrong and injustice. Even small achievements to that end would surely be a cause of 'blessedness', of great 'happiness'.

*Blessed are those who hunger and thirst for righteousness, for they will be filled*