

Lent Compline Talks 2018 St Mary's Kidlington

Prof John Morris
Compline, March 18th

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.

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Prof John Morris
Compline, February 25th

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.

Lent Compline Talks 2018 St Mary's Kidlington

Prof John Morris
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.

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Compline, March 11th

The Beatitudes

4: Blessed are the meek for they shall inherit the earth

In the authorised version of Matthew's beatitudes we read the familiar "Blessed are the meek: for they shall inherit the earth". The New English Bible's version of this beatitude is "How blest are those of a gentle spirit; they shall have the earth for their possession".

Interestingly there is no equivalent in Luke's gospel, which is thought to be earlier; Matthew's gospel reflecting the experience of the church in post-Easter persecutions.

The authorised version and NEB - both acknowledged as the most scholarly translations of the earliest Greek versions available - say essentially the same thing "meek" equals "of gentle spirit" and "inherit the earth" is the same as "have the earth for their possession".

It is really quite unambiguous in its apparent meaning; and, on first reading, one is tempted to explode "what rubbish". Look at any leader who has had large swathes of the earth for their possession either literally as land - from Alexander the Great, via the Romans who controlled Jesus' Israel, to Vladimir Putin; or as worldly possessions - think Sir Philip Green - then meekness is certainly not the first description that springs to mind. It was not Churchill's "meekness" that was celebrated in the recent film "The Longest Day"! Clearly, we need to look much more deeply into this apparently ridiculous beatitude.

In previous compline talks, I noted that Matthew seeks to portray Jesus and his teachings as the messianic fulfilment of old testament prophecies. And in Psalm 37.11 - one of the messianic psalms - we find "The meek shall possess the land"; very similar to this beatitude. What land is meant? Probably the promised land. All through the Old Testament a physical land was seen as God's promise to the people of Israel. And 'possessing the land' implied much more than simple occupation; it signified a sense of place, security, an inheritance from God. But the land was constantly invaded and the people exiled and scattered. And yet the promise of their regathering to the land remained as a key aspect of the old Covenant. The people of Jesus' time were looking for the coming of a Messiah. John the Baptist's question from prison "Are you he who is to come, or should we look for another". Small wonder then that many of Jesus's hearers mistook his messianic vision as the overthrow of the Romans and Jewish control of what they considered their "promised land". And it is not only the people of Jesus' day - even today we hear exactly the same message from the Israeli government to justify the building of settlements in the west bank because they consider it their God-given inheritance - and at last they have the power to enforce this. Their only problem is that another group, the Palestinians, hold roughly the same view. But are the actions of the Israeli government what anyone could reasonably call "meek" - they have the most advanced military machine in the area and as far as one can see, they use it ruthlessly.

So, for the moment, let's leave inheriting or possessing the earth and turn to meekness. Again if we look to the OT for an understanding of Matthew's text, the only person in the OT described as 'meek' is (guess who) Moses (Numbers 12.3) "Moses was very meek" or in the NEB "Moses was .. a man of great humility, the most humble man on earth". And Isaiah's (29.19 & 16.1) prophesy "the meek shall increase their joy" and that the messiah will be "good tidings to the meek".

Today people rarely use the term 'meek' but, if you asked, they would probably equate it with 'weak'. But its meaning is very different. My ancient OED says it comes from old Norse 'miukr' meaning soft and gentle and defines 'meek' as 'piously humble & submissive; submitting quietly to injury' - almost a perfect description of Jesus; but no-one would call either Moses or Jesus 'weak'. Moses, was one of the strongest and most determined of leaders; Jesus' meekness is a sign of his strength as love overcomes hate and hope overcomes fear.

St. Gregory of Nyssa suggests that the Beatitudes form a set of steps which help us climb from one to the next. So, the 'poor in spirit' in the first beatitude become the meek, become gentle and kind, even in the face of adversity and hardship. Jesus was "meek and humble of heart" (Matthew 11:29). A person that is meek is one who exhibits self-control, and that often requires greater strength than resisting external challenges. Bishop Stephen writes that humility is the very foundation of the character of Jesus who, for our sake, took the form of a slave (Philipp 2:7). Meekness should, therefore, be the foundation of the life of the church. St. Augustine advises us to be meek in the face of our Lord, and to be humbly obedient to him. Obedience and submission to the will of God are not in vogue these days, but they are what will bring true peace in this world and in the next.

In this world we are not just individuals but part of the ongoing human story. We must therefore also be meek in relation to our brothers and sisters in this generation and in the generations yet to come. The meek do not exploit and oppress others; they are not given to vengeance, they are not violent, and they do not try to seize power for their own ends; but neither are they weak or ineffective in life. They may be gentle and humble, but they can and do champion the needs of the weak and the oppressed. In short, they have emulated the nature of Jesus in their lives and learned from him.

How can I become meek if my natural instinct is not to be meek? Other passages of the bible are clear that meekness, gentleness and goodness are part of the fruit of the Spirit - they are produced in the Christian by the Holy Spirit. So, to cultivate a spirit of meekness we must literally 'walk in the Spirit'; we must be so controlled by the Spirit of God that the qualities of Christ can be produced in us. A tall order that calls for a lifetime's effort!

So now we have a clearer idea of what meekness means and the very real strength and determination that it implies, let's turn back to "the earth" which the meek will inherit. We humans have, by our evolution, quite literally been given charge of "the earth" our planet as our home. As Bishop Stephen points out, today it is quite obvious that the whole human race needs to learn a meekness and humility in relation to the earth for the sake not only of humanity now, but of the generations who will come after us. Human actions are directly affecting our climate; together we are depleting the earth's resources. How will our "inheritance of the earth" affect our children and grandchildren? The Church needs to be leading the way in meekness and humility before creation in loving and caring for the earth.

And it is not just this physical earth that we are to care for. When Jesus at his trial was asked by Pilate "Are you a king then?" Jesus made it clear that his kingdom was not the "promised land" of Israel of the Jewish concept: "My kingdom is not of this world". Jesus' kingdom is the whole company of believers in the past, in the present and in the futures that we can now only glimpse "through a glass darkly".

The promise of this beatitude "The meek shall inherit the earth" is for all who are in Jesus' New Covenant. And the promise will be fulfilled in a far more glorious way than any of us can imagine or could imagine. That new creation, the kingdom of God, will be populated not by powerful despots, by tyrants, or by manipulative schemers but, both here on this earth and in heaven, it will be filled with those who are truly the "meek".

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Compline, March 18th

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 20th 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

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Prof John Morris
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The Beatitudes

6: Blessed are the merciful, for they shall obtain mercy

This beatitude in Matthew's 'Sermon on the Mount' is not directly mirrored in Luke, but almost immediately after Luke's shorter version of the beatitudes we find "Be merciful, just as your Father is merciful", which is almost the same.

We all know what 'mercy' is - it is a loving, compassionate, forgiving disposition towards those who suffer distress. Pope Francis says "Mercy is the very foundation of the Church's life". Mercy in the bible has both a general and a specific meaning. The general meaning is love and kindness; the specific focusses on mercy as forgiveness. But we must then ask a number of questions: "To whom should we be merciful? From whom shall we obtain mercy if we ourselves are merciful? and "When shall we obtain that mercy?"

To whom should we be merciful? The Lord's prayer gives us a direct answer. That familiar sentence which we shall shortly say as part of our Compline service "Forgive us our trespasses *as we forgive them that trespass against us*" and we ask for forgiveness from our Father in heaven; almost exactly the same as the beatitude. We therefore have an answer to two of my questions. We must be merciful to others who do us wrong; and our Father will forgive us.

But surely it is not only to those who have "trespassed against us" that we should show mercy. Bishop Stephen writes that the Church is called to be a community of mercy. When people meet us, love and mercy should be the first qualities they encounter - we should be a mirror of the body of Christ. In his ministry Jesus was gentle and full of mercy. You'll remember that Jesus had particularly harsh words for an unmerciful servant who was forgiven a debt by his master but did not forgive the debt of his fellow servant.

Some evolutionary biologists would argue that humans are not naturally forgiving; that our evolutionary priority is to dominate so that we pass on our genes. But this argument neglects the fact that we humans are a very social animal. We should therefore be forgiving to everyone with whom we come into contact; and on occasion that can be difficult! However, love, compassion, and forgiveness towards family members, neighbours, church or work colleagues are very important for harmonious relationships in our various social groups.

But it is not just our immediate group; we need to be merciful to a much wider group than our immediate contacts. Jesus reminds us that whatever "you did to the least of my brethren, you did it to me". This follows on from what we were thinking about last Sunday - our much wider responsibility in our globally connected world. We are commanded to what are called "the bodily works of mercy": to feed the hungry; give drink to the thirsty; clothe the naked; shelter the homeless; and visit the imprisoned and sick. A tall order; and there is also the "spiritual works of mercy" which include spreading the news about God's love; comforting the sorrowful; and praying for all those in need.

If we do that we are called blessed because we place showing mercy above our own rights; we care for people in need, and try to heal wounds.

We must also be merciful to **ourselves**. If we are meek, poor in spirit (the earlier beatitudes) then we know that we are not self-sufficient, that we shall make errors; we will know our own inadequacies and dependence. Shortly in the compline prayers we shall say “make us so to abound in sorrow for our sins, which were the cause of thy passion”. But, unless we are confident of God’s mercy to us we can beat ourselves up and this can lead to all sorts of problems. And sometimes it can be particularly hard for us to forgive *ourselves* for something we know we have done wrong! Psychologists tell us that it is important to be merciful to ourselves before we can be merciful to others. Indeed, there’s a real positive feedback in it. The more we understand the grace of God in our own lives (which will come from the experience of confession of sin and thanksgiving for forgiveness -- two things that often get neglected) the more we shall be able to be merciful to others.

From whom shall we obtain mercy? The obvious answer is from our Father in heaven and therefore effectively from our Lord himself. But also in a very practical way, we are much more likely to be forgiven by others to whom we have wittingly or unwittingly done wrong if we ourselves are known to be forgiving. And, as we have just seen, we may even be more merciful to ourselves - mercy is contagious!

When shall we obtain mercy? Perhaps the first answer to this part of the question that comes to mind is the divine mercy in the final judgement, when all our pretensions are stripped away and in the words of Paul “we shall know, even as we are known”. Our Lord promises that we can be confident that we shall receive mercy, not because we have accumulated enough good deeds, but because we have understood mercy in all its forms during our own spiritual pilgrimage and were eager to share it with others, knowing that we ourselves have been forgiven, day by day. So it is not just at that last judgement when “The trumpet shall sound and the dead shall be raised”. Indeed, time cannot have the same meaning in eternity. God’s love for us and his mercy is a constant present every day of our lives. Indeed, we are truly blessed when we understand that.

Lent Compline Talks 2018 St Mary's Kidlington

Prof John Morris
Compline, March 26th

The Beatitudes

7: Blessed are the Pure in Heart, for they shall see God

This beatitude is very familiar to us through the well-known hymn “Blessed are the pure in heart, for they shall see our God” and I suspect that many of us have, on occasion, sung that on autopilot without either realising its demands or thinking carefully about the implications of the promised reward.

Let's start with the phrase “pure in heart”. At the last ‘Open space’ on the character of Christ the topic was ‘purity’. What do we mean by that? It can be illuminating to look at a word's antithesis. What does the word “impurity” bring to mind? In terms of human behaviour it often has a sexual connotation. So “purity” certainly has implications of cleanness and inner chastity - we can recall what Jesus said about thinking lustful thoughts, let alone the actions. But purity of heart means much more than sexual morality.

The Greek for pure is *katharos* which simply means clean (which is where we get our word “cathartic” for a cleansing experience.) A very similar Greek adjective is *akeratos* which means unmixed, or unadulterated. Purity of heart is much more than chastity, more than the legal purity required by the Old Testament scribes and Pharisees (for example the dietary laws - Jesus turns that on its head when he says “it is what comes out of a person's mouth that defiles, not what goes in!”). It is more even than a general purity of conscience. Purity of heart also requires a purity of intention and that is most of all required works of mercy (which we considered yesterday). If we are honest, we find it very difficult to act without any mixed motives. We may give of our time or money sacrificially, but the danger is that we bask in our own self-approval or the approval of others, which is why Jesus goes on to talk about “doing our good works in secret”. There is a lovely story about John Bunyan who, when congratulated on a splendid sermon by someone in the congregation, sadly replied “The devil already told me that as I was coming down the pulpit steps”. Bishop Stephen sums this up as “living from the inside out” which he compares this with the concerns of many who live “from the outside in”, and are concerned with prestige and outward appearances.

How can we get a “pure heart”? Christians are called to bring unclean and divided hearts to God in meekness to be made clean. For some this may begin with a moment of conversion - quite literally a “change of heart”; but I suspect that for most of us it is continuing lifetimes work. And it will not be easy. The process of evolution has embedded in all of us drives which run very contrary to the Christ-like ideal. We are programmed to survive, even at the expense of others; to reproduce our species, for males with many partners, for females with what appear biologically to be the fittest. When Nicodemus came to Jesus by night, Jesus told him that he must be “born again” and Nicodemus' response was couched in very biological language - “Can a man enter a second time into his mother's womb?”. The essential change is not that sort of biology; but it really is biologically based in the evolutionary development of our brains. Teilhard de Chardin, the French catholic priest and evolutionary biologist argues that it is man's ability to think and analyse and to contemplate immaterial things that is a further step in evolution - the “noosphere” which is where Christian purity of heart can develop. But it is not inevitable - our complex brains can take us in all sorts of directions. We shall only gain purity of heart when, in the words of the second line of the hymn, our “soul is Christ's abode”; and he will not force his way in, we must invite him. Through the work of the holy spirit we shall be more aware of our impurities, and our thoughts and actions will hopefully become more and more pure.

And so, to the promise “the pure in heart shall see God”. What an amazing statement! The Old Testament view is that no-one could see God and live. For Moses God appeared as the burning bush or as ‘the hem of God’s garment’ on Mount Sinai. Those of you who heard the Messiah excerpts last week will remember the passage from Job “I know that my Redeemer liveth, and that he shall stand in the latter day upon the earth. And though worms destroy my body, yet in my flesh shall I see God”. Clearly all this implies that only after death shall we see God.

Is the promise reassuring - I suggest it might also be fearful. In Cardinal Newman’s “The Dream of Gerontius” set to music by Elgar, when Gerontius asks his angel “shall I see my Lord” he is told “Yes, for one moment thou shalt see thy Lord - one moment only - but thou knowest not my child what thou dost ask. That sight of the most fair will gladden thee, but it will pierce thee too!”. How will we feel when all of our pretensions are stripped away and we stand before God who is pure goodness. Thankfully, as we talked about on Sunday, if we have been merciful, then we can be sure of God’s mercy.

But is it only after death that we shall ‘see God’? I suggest that this beatitude implies that here and now, by faith, we will ‘see God’ in the events and circumstances of our lives. So, let’s end with some thoughts about what it means to “see”. We use the word in two ways - vision and understanding. Of course, our eyes are important - as any defect makes obvious. However, the image we perceive is only partly dependent on our eyes but is constructed by our brains - the visual images in our dreams shows that clearly. This means that, for the same external reality, we ‘see’ different things depending on our brains as well as our eyes. The brain is a learning machine. A trained art expert will be able to ‘see’ in a painting things that most of us would miss. So too we must constantly train our brain so that we create “a pure heart” within us. Then, as Paul puts it, although we now see “through a glass darkly”, then we shall see our God and Lord “face to face”.

Lent Compline Talks 2018 St Mary's Kidlington

Prof John Morris
Compline, March 27th

The Beatitudes

8: Blessed are the peacemakers for they shall be called children of God

Every week at the Communion we 'share the peace' with one another and as members of the church I guess that we count ourselves as 'children of God'. So, at first sight, unlike some of the other beatitudes, this beatitude does not sound either particularly controversial or demanding. We're all for peace, aren't we?

But what do we mean by 'peace'? The word has so many usages. We say "peace be with you" at communion, though we probably wouldn't when we meet a friend in the street - maybe that's the English reserve. We've all seen the American films where two hippies greet one another with "peace, man" and high fives. The muslims say "salaam"; Jews "shalom". At the start of his commentary on this beatitude William Barclay points out that the Hebrew *shalom* never means simply the absence of conflict, but always means '*everything which makes for a person's highest good*'.

And the beatitude talks about 'peacemakers' rather than 'peace-lovers'. Just wanting to avoid conflict and lead a 'quiet life' can itself be the cause of a lack of peace for others, and non-involvement is certainly not something that works for their 'highest good'. If we let a situation develop just because we want to avoid conflict, things can easily get worse. In that sense, non-engagement is not an option.

The peace which the bible calls blessed does not come from an evasion of issues, but from facing issues and conquering them. We have a perfect model in our Lord who faced the ultimate challenge and conquered it, so that he could say at the last supper "My peace I leave with you; my peace I give unto you. (John 14)". So, the making of peace can be the result of struggle and effort, and is unlikely to come from a passive acceptance; that is submissiveness, not peace. And, of course, this applies both to our own internal struggles and in our dealings with the situations with which we are confronted.

If peace "shalom" means the highest good it must mean making the world a better place for *everyone* to live in. That means peace in our own hearts, where there is always something of a battle going on (at least for me) (Paul in his letter to the Romans says "The good which I want to do, I fail to do; but the evil that I would not, that I do"). This takes us back to the beatitude we discussed last evening - becoming 'pure in heart' - it's a real ongoing internal struggle.

Peace also involves developing right relationships with other people. We all know people who always seem to be involved in quarrels of some sort. The frightening rise in on-line 'trolling' and hate speech shows just how far we fall short of a peace that is 'for the highest good' of others. And we all know those lovely individuals who are the opposite, bringing people together, often selflessly and at considerable cost. It is God's work, and so our work, to heal breaches, to encourage people to live and work together in brotherly love. But we cannot give to another person or group that which we do not ourselves possess. So it's a circular process - to be a peacemaker we must first experience the peace that is the fruit of the Holy Spirit in our own lives. In our public intercessions in church we frequently pray for peace often in response to some particular horror in the newspapers. But as I was writing this I became acutely aware how infrequently I pray for peace of all sorts in private. My school report would certainly read "Could do better!"

Christ himself made it clear that peace is not the absence of conflict. Luke reports Jesus saying "Do you suppose I came to establish peace on earth? No, indeed, I have come to bring division". While there is sin; sin of selfishness, of greed, there will always be division between good and bad. The peace that God brings is not a cessation of hostilities, tolerance, or the readiness to give way. True peace that the world needs calls for a complete change of nature. Reconciliation with God can then extend to reconciliation with other people.

Let's turn now to the reward; the peacemakers shall be called 'children of God'. In the old testament the "sons of God" was a description of angels, and only rarely implied human salvation. But in the new testament it is the reverse. The new testament usage is that believers have been born anew into God's family. If we are "children of God" then God is a very real sense "our Father" - hence Jesus taught us to pray to "Our Father in heaven". In the original Greek "sons of God" - which follows the Hebrew use of 'Bar' hence "Bar-nabas" the son of consolation; blind Bar-timeus; Bar-abbas (literally the son of the father). "Like father; like son" we often say thinking primarily of the genetic links that become perhaps increasingly obvious. Relatives visiting the new baby will sometimes say "He's got his father's nose or ears" (a bit far-fetched); but I have a photo of one of our works lunches a few years ago, and every time I look at it I think "What's my father doing there? Only to realise that it is me! The stoop, the hair are identical. My father meant a great deal to me not only in providing a loving home but as a great example. How much more so the reward of having God as "our Father" providing a loving home now and in eternity and also through his son our Lord, a supreme example of how we should live.

But children also have responsibilities to their father. In Jesus' time the son would usually be doing the same work as his father. "Is this not Jesus the son of Joseph the carpenter?" they asked when Jesus first started preaching in Nazareth. So, being sons or children of God implies quite literally that we should be engaged in the same work as 'Our Father', the God of Peace (to quote Paul); St Gregory of Nyssa called it "imitating God's love of us". Our Father worked through his Son Jesus during his earthly ministry; they continue to work today through the Holy Spirit; and, as "children of God" we, as Jesus' disciples, should also be 'peacemakers' with all that this implies.

Lent Compline Talks 2018 St Mary's Kidlington

Prof John Morris
Compline, March 28th

The Beatitudes

9: Blessed are those who are persecuted for righteousness' sake; for theirs is the kingdom of heaven.

And this passage goes on to elaborate: "Blessed are you when men revile you and persecute you and utter all kinds of evil against you falsely on my account. Rejoice and be glad, for your reward is great in heaven, for so they persecuted the prophets who were before you" (Matthew 5:11).

The equivalent beatitude in Luke in the New English Bible is even more striking "How blest you are when men hate you, when they outlaw you and insult you, and ban your very name as infamous because of the Son of Man. On that day be glad and dance for joy; for assuredly you have a rich reward in heaven." And Luke continues with the anti-beatitude warning "But alas for you when all men speak well of you; just so did their fathers treat false prophets."

One of the outstanding qualities of Jesus was his sheer honesty. He left no-one in any doubt of the consequences if they chose to follow him. He said many times that those who follow Him will be persecuted. *"If they persecute me, they will persecute you"* (John 15:20). Stephen, Peter and Paul, nearly all of the Apostles, were martyred for their faith. John the Baptist was killed by Herod; in the Roman era, Nero coated Christians with pitch, set them alight and used them as torches in his gardens. Since then, successive governments and endless conflicts around the world have seen their share of martyrs; and the list goes on and on. In our own time, Bonhoeffer in the 2nd world war; Oscar Romero, Archbishop of San Salvador, assassinated while saying Mass in 1980 for speaking out against government human rights violations. Today the troubles of the middle east continue the persecution. In 2014 the Islamic State marked remaining Christian homes in Mosul with the Arabic letter Noon (for Nazarene) and told residents that they had 24 hours to leave, convert to Islam, or die - the modern equivalent of the requirement of first century Christians publicly to acknowledge "Caesar is Lord" or be outlawed. To our undying shame, Christians slaughtered Muslims thinking they were doing God's will during the mediaeval crusades and various Christian groups have since killed one another in the name of a religious sect. The martyr's memorial in the centre of Oxford is a very poignant local reminder of that. So often the religious difference is just a cloak - what is really at stake is power, privilege and possessions - things for which we humans often have a great lust.

As we explored yesterday, being a peacemaker won't exclude us from conflict - indeed we should expect it - and certainly championing righteousness (which is really the same as pursuing everything that makes for a person's highest good) is more than likely to bring us into conflict with powerful vested interests. Here in UK we are unlikely to be thrown to the lions or killed, but there may well be persecution of some sort for following Christ and for speaking out against injustice. This may be at work, in our social life, and even within families. At work, remaining faithful to the gospel can cost people their jobs - whistle-blowers often are treated shamefully; in our social life we may well be mocked; and in a family there can be a great deal of personal hurt. Jesus shows us by his example that we, as his disciples, must endure and be willing to bear whatever the cost.

For most of us, I guess we have never in our lives had to make anything like a really life-threatening sacrifice for Jesus. It is only at the moment when following our faith is likely to involve really substantial personal cost that we shall know the sincerity of our faith. Here and now we can only pray that we shall not be found wanting if and when that challenge comes.

And now the reward “for theirs is the kingdom of heaven”. Our Lord promises those who suffer for the sake of righteousness will be rewarded with the Kingdom of Heaven! Again, we have to ask whether that promise applies only after death - or is it also a promise for the here and now? For those who have been quite literally martyred for their faith, we can only trust to our Lord’s promise that, after their death, they will be with him in eternity.

What about for us, here and now? Jesus’ message about the kingdom was not simply for after death. At the start of his preaching in Galilee Jesus says “The time has come, the kingdom of God is upon you” and, after a healing “then be sure that the kingdom has *already* come upon you”. For us, the ‘kingdom of heaven’ in our daily lives is surely that deep feeling of blessing that we have done the right thing at times when we have been tested, despite whatever we saw as the cost. In the words of the hymn, we must “live our lives courageously” both individually and as a church. Indeed, at the close of his commentary “Exploring the Beatitudes” Bishop Stephen asks us to consider how we as a church community can be more courageous. What would be different if we were a more courageous church? How can we support one another to be more courageous in the practice of our faith? This is the real challenge of the beatitudes for us not only this Lent but in the years to come - to bring the ‘kingdom of heaven’ a little closer to this world here and now.

“Blessed are those who are persecuted for righteousness’ sake; for theirs is the kingdom of heaven”.

God of gentleness and love, draw near to us as we draw near to you. Dwell in every heart and conversation. Fashion us in the likeness of your Son, Jesus Christ. Help us to discern in the beatitudes what you are calling us to be and to do. Help us, by the Holy Spirit, to be a more contemplative, more compassionate and more courageous church.