

Sermon for 'All Saints & All Souls', Nov 5 2017

Dear Friends,

Every year at St Andrew's we join together for an annual Lent Study course, and back in 2014, we took today's reading, the Beatitudes, as our focus. These 9 sayings give an excellent summary of Jesus's deeper teaching, for those who truly seek to follow Him. If taken seriously, they are a great resource for spiritual encouragement and deepening. For this reason, they are a brilliant choice as the Gospel set for All Saints and All Souls, and as we begin to look forward to period of spiritual preparation in Advent.

On first encounter the Beatitudes can seem challenging and confrontational - hardly words offering great spiritual comfort, we might think. But if we go deeper, we find great riches for our spiritual journey.

'Blessed are the poor in spirit, for theirs is the Kingdom of Heaven'. Much ink has been spilt in interpreting these profound words. They remind us that in all our situations of human need, Jesus offers us the opportunity to strengthen our relationship with God. He wants us to be joyful and blessed in that relationship. Hence, when he says *Blessed are the poor in Spirit*, he is certainly not commending material poverty, because poverty is unjust and diminishes the human spirit, whereas Jesus wants us to join with Him in building a better world. One concludes, then, that Jesus is getting at something much deeper. He's saying that we are blessed when we recognise our spiritual thirst and neediness - our spiritual poverty - because when we turn in all sincerity to God with a humble, seeking heart, these needs will be satisfied. If all is going well in our lives - we have that 'good job', a happy relationship and are surrounded by material luxury - then we can get complacent and self-congratulatory, and it's much harder to feel a sense of spiritual urgency. It's often when things get out of kilter in some way, that we start to ask more serious questions about the true value and purpose of our lives. It's the starting point for realising that we need a real relationship with God. This awareness enables us to experience the rich blessing of his love at work within us.

We especially need this blessing in our experiences of grief, loss and mourning, and the confused welter of very painful and difficult emotions that go with these experiences. On a first encounter this second Beatitude can seem glib, unfeeling and insensitive. How can Jesus speak of there being any blessing in mourning, particularly when our loss is raw and keen? This teaching seems to miss the mark, when it comes to real human experience.

But of course, Jesus knows what it means to be human through and through. He knows our pain and suffering, because He entered fully into it. He himself experienced these deep emotions when He wept at the threshold of his dear friend Lazarus's tomb. He also knew that before the end, He himself would have to go

through a terrible death, and that his friends and loved ones would experience bitter pain and loss. We can hardly think of Jesus, then, as being insensitive to our human situation.

As with the first Beatitude, His teaching is intended for His disciples, and He's speaking about the bigger picture. He is fully aware that at the time of loss we can feel immersed in the dark mists surrounding the vale of shadows. But He also knows that in time the intensity of our emotions will diminish.

He knows furthermore - because He experienced it Himself - that in our experiences of spiritual need and especially of grief, our souls open and awake. They are ready, we are ready, if we are aware of our need, to receive an in-pouring of God's healing presence, comfort and love. This can be a time when our relationship with God can be greatly strengthened. Within the stream of rapidly alternating emotions - sorrow, shock, incredulity, numbness, anger, guilt - and many more - if we can make space for prayerful openness, the sweet healing grace of God's Holy Spirit touches our hearts. Having made this deep level contact with God, we may decide that we wish to maintain this relationship, even when the passage of time has made the emotions less raw. This, Jesus says, is a great blessing on our path through life.

'Beatitude' means a saying that brings blessing and true happiness. If we take these teachings of Jesus seriously, they can be seen as a spiritual doorway leading to a closer relationship with God. As such, they offer not the usual peace and happiness of the world, but something much more profound: a sense of peace and comfort that passes all understanding.

Drawn into a loving relationship with God, we find that our faith in invisible, spiritual realities grows stronger: the belief that death is not the end; the reflection that in our prayers and spiritual life, especially the Eucharist, we may feel united with those who have died and crossed the threshold into the spiritual world; the hope that we will one day be re-united with our loved ones in the life beyond; and best of all, Jesus's promise that the unimaginable glory of the Resurrection awaits those who seek in faithfulness to follow His way.

In the light of these thoughts, may the Beatitudes become for us all a doorway opening onto a fuller relationship with God, and the fuller experience of His love and blessing at work in our lives. And may our awareness of our spiritual poverty and experiences of personal loss inspire us to found our lives on the rock of faith, that we may know the sense of meaning, purpose and spiritual fulfilment that God, our loving Father, intends for us all. Amen.

Revd Ian Welch, 5/11/2017