

2019 St Mary's Nottingham 17 Feb 10.45am Beatitudes

Prayer

The Beatitudes. Part of Jesus' **'Sermon on the Mount'**. Or 'Sermon on the Plain' as Luke's version is sometimes called. That wonderful list of blessings with which most of us are very familiar – though we may well be more familiar with the version recorded in Matthew's gospel. According to Luke, Jesus says:

'Blessed are you who are poor, for yours is the kingdom of God.

Blessed are you who are hungry now, for you will be filled.

Blessed are you who weep now, for you will laugh.

Blessed are you when people hate you, and when they exclude you, revile you, and defame you on account of the Son of Man.

Rejoice in that day and leap for joy, for surely your reward is great in heaven.'

These are familiar words to most of us. And familiarity, as so often with Bible passages we know well, is a big problem for us. Because, for people like most of us, these are not so much beautiful, comforting words, but dire warnings. It is hard for us to appreciate just how radical, how shockingly counter cultural these statements are. They make a complete mockery of the world's perspective.

After all, in worldly terms, blessed are the **rich**, for they are enjoying a winter cruise around the Caribbean, comfortable in the knowledge that

their share portfolio is well spread internationally, to offset any unwanted negative effects of Brexit.

And blessed are the **full**, who, when it comes to eating, find it so hard to choose between Harts – or a lighter night out, at Bar Iberica, after the concert of course. And thank God for Gaviscon - where would we be without it?

The word 'full' suggest not only 'full of food' but also **satisfied** in every respect, so that we don't have awareness of, or sensitivity to, the needs of others, nor any appetite for tackling them.

Blessed are those who **laugh**, those who have secured tickets for the next series of Peter Kaye Gigs. (What I wouldn't give for a ticket to a Peter Kaye gig!) Blessed are those who laugh at adversity, who have all their bases covered; who have their BUPA health insurance in place; who live safely in a gated community and drive a big 4x4, which may guzzle a bit of diesel, but makes you feel **so** safe & secure on the motorway. And, blessed are those who, just in case, have applied for an Irish passport.

Well, it is easy to laugh at all these, but it is worth us asking **ourselves**: What makes us feel secure? What **we** are really looking forward to; what do **we** spend our time thinking about, planning for? What are **we** really longing for, hoping for? Are we longing for justice for the poor and oppressed? Are we planning support and seeking housing for the homeless and those who are vulnerable, afraid, alone? Are we thinking

about children who are starving because of the civil war in the Yemen?  
Are we hoping & praying for a breakthrough in tackling global warming?  
Or do we actually spend our time thinking, planning, preparing for, hoping  
for, looking forward to: The next holiday? Wales vs England on Feb 22<sup>nd</sup>?  
That job application – promotion **and** another 10k a year!? Or, maybe,  
fitting the new kitchen?

I was on retreat, some years ago, when we were asked this question:  
‘What are you thinking about, longing for, looking forward to, right now?’  
And, what flooded **my** mind, I am sorry to say, was **not** the homeless, the  
hungry, the vulnerable or the oppressed. What flooded my mind was the  
thought, of my next round of golf, with my mate Michael.

St Luke’s version of the Beatitudes differs significantly from that reported  
by St Matthew. Matthew tends to spiritualise these sayings. We have no  
way of knowing which was Jesus’ original version? Nor indeed whether, at  
different times, he used both variants.

Hence Luke says simply: ‘Blessed are the poor’. Whereas Matthew says:  
‘Blessed are the poor in spirit.’

Luke says ‘Blessed are the hungry’. Whereas Matthew says: ‘Blessed are  
those who hunger & thirst for righteousness.’

Like it or not, Luke is more of a ‘Robin Hood’ gospel. Very hot t on Jesus’  
concern for the poor and his condemnation of the rich. And no wonder.  
Research shows that the poor, in general, give away a higher proportion  
of their income than the rich. The richer you are, the less you give.

Luke is the one who includes the parable of the rich man and Lazarus.  
Luke tells us about Zacchaeus the tax-collector, who, after meeting Jesus,  
repays four-fold everyone he has cheated, and, on top, gives half of his  
wealth to the poor.

Luke and Matthew both tell us to sell our possessions and give to the  
poor, that we may have riches in heaven.

And the same Luke also wrote the book of Acts, where we do indeed see  
early church members selling their possessions in order to provide for  
those in need. In all the New Testament, and indeed, in the whole Bible,  
there is an awful lot more about our use of money and possessions than  
there is about gender, sex & sexuality, though you wouldn’t know that if  
you regularly read the Church Times or the Daily Mail.

You may ask, incidentally, who **are** the rich? Well, I think a good working  
definition is that the rich are, for most practical purposes: retired clergy  
(like me) and all who earn the same as, or more than, they do.

What is particularly challenging about Luke’s version of the Beatitudes is  
that they not only contain blessings. They also contain ‘Woes’. Curses  
almost. Dire warnings. ‘Woe to you,’ ‘Alas for you,’ ‘How terrible for you,’  
says Jesus: ‘You who are rich, for you have already received your reward.’  
The word literally means: ‘paid in full’. You’ve been paid in full already, so,  
after this life, don’t expect anything else good to happen to you. I’m afraid  
you’ve had your lot already mate.

I suspect, if you are anything like me, you are probably a mixture of things. You probably **are** concerned about poverty, injustice, homelessness, climate change, etc. But, if you are honest, you probably spend a lot more time thinking about the personal welfare, desires, hopes and ambitions of yourself and your loved ones.

I don't know whether you ever came across John Hull? He was a blind professor of Theology at Birmingham University. I was at a conference once when he was talking about self-deception. He used an example given to him by a Nancy, woman from his church. She was invited to her friend Brenda's house for lunch, one Sunday after church. It was a nice enough lunch, though Brenda's husband behaved rather strangely and, after lunch, while the two women did the washing up in the kitchen, Brenda's husband fell fast asleep on the sofa. After a while Nancy said: 'Excuse me saying it Brenda, but your husband is pissed.' There was an awkward silence, after which Brenda replied. 'Er, no. He's always like that.' 'Well in that case' replied Nancy 'he's **always** pissed.'

It was the beginning of the painful realisation for Brenda, and later for her husband too, that he was an alcoholic, something Brenda had gradually, and unwittingly, colluded with for years. And it was the beginning for him, eventually, of dealing with it. It is so easy to deceive ourselves.

Our reading from Jeremiah says:

'The heart is deceitful above all else; it is perverse. Who can fathom it?'

And that is exactly our problem. Certainly **my** problem. I read the familiar words of the Beatitudes, which, on the face of it, seem so reassuring, so beautiful. But I don't think those dire warnings, those woes, those curses, really apply to me. I fool myself into feeling comforted, reassured, and blessed – instead of shocked, challenged and determined to change.

Instead, my heart reveals that **my** treasure chest is actually full, **not** of the poor, the hungry, the persecuted and the weeping, but rather of our planned holiday in Shetland, tickets for the cricket world cup at Trent Bridge and my next round of golf.

Lawrence, a deacon in the church in Rome in the 3<sup>rd</sup> Century was arrested for being a Christian. When questioned, about where the churches treasure was located, he lined up a group of poor people, to whom the church had been giving alms, and said: 'These are the treasures of the church'. For which, he was tortured to death on a gridiron.

'Where your treasure is, there will your heart be also' says Jesus. In truth I am not totally given over to thinking about holidays and sport. I **do** spend time worrying about homelessness, war and persecution in the middle east, global warming, and, of course, Brexit. I even sometimes try and do something about some of these things. **My** treasure chest contains a mixture of things. Some of which Jesus may well approve of. And some of which probably leave him in despair.

So, maybe it is time for a bit of honesty. Time for a bit of self-examination. Time to stop pretending that everything in our garden is rosy. Time to think about what it is we/I really treasure. Time to take seriously Jesus costly call to discipleship which puts the poor, the hungry, the persecuted, the weeping, as the main focus of our thoughts, our prayers and, perhaps especially, our actions and our spending.

Dietrich Bonhoeffer, the famous German Lutheran theologian, who died at the hands of the Nazis for his opposition to Hitler, said, in one of his letters from prison to his brother:

‘The renewal of the church will come from an uncompromising allegiance to the sermon on the mount. It is high time that men and women banded together to do this.’

Indeed, that time has surely come.

In the name of God, Father, Son & Holy Spirit. Amen.