

CUTTING EDGE CAMELOT, No 86

Wednesday 3rd February 2021

‘Virtually Church but with some way to go...’

Welcome

Welcome to this new midweek series on the Beatitudes. This contains both a general introduction and a reflection on the first Beatitude ‘Blessed are the poor in spirit.’

Scripture Passage

Matthew 5: 1-12

When Jesus saw the crowds, he went up the mountain; and after he sat down, his disciples came to him. Then he began to speak, and taught them, saying:

“Blessed are the poor in spirit, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven.

“Blessed are those who mourn, for they will be comforted.

“Blessed are the meek, for they will inherit the earth.

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

“Blessed are the merciful, for they will receive mercy.

“Blessed are the pure in heart, for they will see God.

“Blessed are the peacemakers, for they will be called children of God.

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

“Blessed are you when people 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 in the same way they persecuted the prophets who were before you.”

Introduction to the Beatitudes

The Beatitudes have always been considered to be a foundational Christian text. This has been so from the beginning as the Beatitudes are the preface to the Sermon the Mount recorded in Matthew’s gospel.

The Beatitudes are a series of short sayings which declare God’s blessings and promises. Depending on how you count there are either eight or nine of them. However, the ninth largely recaps the eighth in terms of its theme of persecution. It can also be seen as a link to the next section of the Sermon on the Mount. This series will last for eight weeks and look in turn at each of the first eight Beatitudes.

These eight beatitudes can also be divided into two groups of four. The first group (those who are poor in spirit, those who mourn, those who are meek and those who hunger and thirst for righteousness) can be looked at in terms of our relationship with God and in how we ask God to act to bring in God’s Kingdom.

The second group (those who are merciful, pure in heart, peacemakers and persecuted for their righteousness) can be seen in terms of our relationship with other people and in how we act to bring in God’s kingdom.

However, although this is mathematically neat, this is only one way of looking at how the Beatitudes are put together and we should remain open to understanding the richness of their meaning at many different levels.

In the Beatitudes, the Kingdom of Heaven (another way of saying the Kingdom of God) and righteousness are key phrases. The first and last Beatitudes speak of the Kingdom of Heaven while the fourth and eighth speak of righteousness.

The Kingdom of God (or Heaven) is contrasted with human kingdoms such as the Roman Empire in Jesus' day and can also be contrasted with national and international kingdoms and empires of our own day. Too often the latter favour the strong, the rich and powerful and can rule through oppression and force. By contrast, the Kingdom of God focusses on helping the poor and marginalised and its ruling principles are love and forgiveness.

In the context of the Beatitudes righteousness means obeying and doing God's will. Jesus gives us the supreme example of righteousness as He humbly obeys the will of God. And it is this kind of humble obedience which is to be at the heart of our own lives as disciples of Jesus.

The main series of Beatitudes occurs in Matthew's gospel. However, Luke's gospel contains another list of Beatitudes (Luke 6: 20-23). This is shorter than Matthew's one and has both similarities and significant differences. Luke's list is followed by a corresponding set of woes (Luke 6: 24-26).

We might find the ethical standards in the Beatitudes and in the whole of the Sermon on the Mount impossible to live up to. Indeed they are if we seek to do this in our own strength. However, Jesus addresses these sayings to those who are already disciples. So they are not meant as a prescription as to how we can achieve a relationship with God. This would simply lead to despair. Rather for those who have already received the grace and forgiveness of Christ they are a picture of what a grace filled life looks like.

Another way of putting this is to say, as Steven Croft does that 'The beatitudes offer a portrait of Christ in eight beautiful qualities...a portrait of what it means to be fully human in a complex and ever-changing world.'

The Church of England vision for the decade of the 2020s is to be a simpler, humbler and bolder church or in other words to be Christ centred and Jesus shaped. The Beatitudes give us a vision not simply for our own lives as individuals but for the church's life as a community of faith. So it is no accident that the Beatitudes have been chosen as a key text in which to anchor this vision for the 2020s of being a simpler, humbler and bolder church.

Reflection, Blessed are the poor in spirit

This opening beatitude lays the foundation for all that follows. Comparing this beatitude with the corresponding one in Luke we find that while Luke simply speaks of 'the poor' Matthew adds the words 'in spirit'.

And this is significant because those who are poor in spirit is a broader category than just the economically poor.

In the Old Testament, the poor in spirit appear in the form of the *anawim* of the Psalms. Yes, these *anawim* may well be experiencing material poverty. But primarily they are those who are faithful to God, who humbly depend on God's protection when oppressed by the powerful.

And Isaiah also speaks of those who are 'humble and contrite in spirit' (Isaiah 66:2) and those who receive God's good news, the oppressed, the broken hearted and the captives (see Isaiah 66:2).

So the poor in spirit recognise their own need of God and the poverty of their own resources in being able to face life's challenges on their own. However, this positive reliance on God is not weakness. But it is the opposite of being

arrogant and self-confident, of trampling over other people and treating God as being, in practical terms, an irrelevance.

Another way of defining the poor in spirit is to look at the people who came to Jesus for help and healing. The sinful woman who washed Jesus' feet may or may not have been poor in economic terms but she was certainly despised by the powerful Pharisee Simon (see Luke 7: 36-50). The tax collector Zacchaeus was a rich man but extraordinarily unpopular by reason of his professional actions (see Luke 19:1-10). And the Roman centurion who came to Jesus to seek healing for his servant may have had a secure job but he was also in desperate need and not afraid to ask for help (see Matthew 8: 5-13).

So the kingdom of God belongs to the poor in spirit. And this ran counter to the values of the kingdoms of the world of Jesus' time. The Roman Empire assisted by their client king Herod together with the religious establishment of the Pharisees and Sadducees favoured the strong, the rich and the powerful.

These were the winners of their time. And the world's kingdoms value the winners. By contrast, in the Kingdom of God, Jesus pronounces the losers, those who are despised and cut off by the rest of society to be blessed.

The values of the kingdom also, if we are honest, run counter to the values of the kingdoms of our world. In so many spheres of life, politics, commerce, education, even yes the church, the values that are highly prized are those of success, strength and self-reliance.

In the law firm where I once worked a colleague explained to me why she had accepted the job she was offered there. She said 'I knew that this was the type of place where if you needed help other people would be happy to give it and they would not refuse because they were thinking of their own prospects of promotion.' That is, of course, a positive comment but it

implies that elsewhere the admission that you needed help might be taken as a sign of weakness and no such help would in fact be given.

The Beatitudes, as with the rest of scripture, leave us with the question 'So what do we do about this?'

If we are not economically poor then we find that the blessing proclaimed in Luke's gospel is one which is directed towards other people. In this case our own responsibility is centred on releasing our generosity and giving.

And yet the question 'Who are the poor in spirit?' is more difficult to answer. The poor in spirit are not necessarily other people, though they may well be. But surely we all have times of loneliness where we feel defeated by life and where it all just seems too much for us.

However living as we do in a culture which values success, strength and self-reliance the temptation is to cover up these feelings and to refuse to acknowledge that they exist even to ourselves let alone to God or to other people. We feel that we need to 'pull ourselves together' and move on.

But looked at from the upside-down perspective of the kingdom of God might not this be the very point at which God is seeking to enter our lives? The point which could prove to be a real turning point? As George put it recently, recalling a former retired priest in this benediction 'Once the Lord gets his foot in the door, one thing tends to lead to another'.

If we have the courage to acknowledge those places in our lives where we are poor in spirit might we not find that this is God's entrance place, the way He gets His foot in the door of our lives?

Tristram

Supporting our community

The Lord's Larder

The Lord's Larder is one of our local foodbanks based in Yeovil. In many of our villages we have central collection points for food to be taken to the Lord's Larder and to other local foodbanks. They are immensely appreciative of the support and of food which is given in this way.

However, they also need financial contributions so that they can buy additional food as needed. If you would like to contribute in this way you can do so by setting up a Standing Order in favour of the Yeovil Christian Support Trust. Their bank details are Unity Trust Bank Plc, Birmingham, Sort Code 60-83-01, Account No 20211112. It is possible to increase the value of these donations by claiming Gift Aid.

North Cadbury Church of England Primary School

The school also immensely appreciates our prayers and support in this difficult period.

While prayer remains primary, some of us may be wondering whether we can also help in practical ways. The need for all families connected with the school to be able to buy books for use at home is very pressing in this time of home schooling.

So the school would appreciate donations of book tokens or gift vouchers for this purpose. If in the first instance you could send these donations to the Parish Office marking any envelopes 'For the School' they can then be passed on promptly to the school.

Points for Prayers

- That we might recognise those times in our lives when we are poor in spirit and have the courage to ask God and others for help
- The restrictions of the third lockdown and sustaining our common life in this time
- The roll out of the different vaccines in combating coronavirus
- Thanksgiving for care, skill and courage of NHS workers and those in care homes
- Those suffering from coronavirus in hospitals, care homes and at home
- Our Bishops (please see notice below)
- For North Cadbury Church Primary School and other local schools as they are unable to open fully at the moment
- Prayers for those affected economically by the lockdown, for businesses and those who have become unemployed
- Prayers and thanksgiving for contributions to the foodbanks and for those helping to take these to the foodbanks.

Suspension of services

Services across the Camelot Group have now been suspended as sadly we concluded that it was not possible to hold them safely in the current circumstances. The suspension of services will be kept under review as circumstances change.

Excalibur

The February edition of Excalibur is now online at camelotparishes.co.uk

The Parish Office

The Parish Office is closed although Rob does come in regularly. In his absence please contact Rob via email (office@camelotparishes.org.uk) or on 01749 850934.

An inclusive Communion celebrated on behalf of the benefice

During the third lockdown as in the others Ron and Pam will be celebrating Communion regularly in their home each Sunday at 10.00 am. Please be aware of this because even though no-one can join them they are praying for us all and hope that you will feel included in this act of Communion.

Update on Bishop Peter

Bishop Peter thanks everyone for all the cards and other expressions of support which he has received. A card was sent to him on behalf of the Camelot Parishes as a whole. He says that he has been lifted on 'eagle's wings' through the love and prayers of others. He has now received a stem cell transplant. Please pray for the new cells to 'do their bit' and for his continued healing. Please continue to pray for him and his family in this challenging time. Please pray also for Bishop Ruth and the rest of the Bishop's Staff as they take on the oversight of the diocese in his absence.

Growing as a worshipper, a servant and a family

*We pray that 'we might live in love,
as Christ loved us and gave himself up for us'*

(Ephesians 5:2)