

Sermon for 1st February 2026, Year A, Epiphany 4

Preached at St John's Baillieston

Matthew 5:1-12

Sermon

Today we have heard Jesus's first sermon as recorded in Matthew's Gospel. These are the famous 'Beatitudes,' so-called because the Latin word for 'blessed' is 'beatus.' Before preaching, Jesus goes up the mountainside, like Moses on his way to receiving the 10 commandments, except that in this case Jesus gives us nine descriptions of a good way to live. Not religious restrictions this time, but exhortations and encouragements.

But there has long been confusion over what these phrases actually mean. The word 'blessed', which comes from the Greek *makarioi*, is sometimes translated as 'happy', but both words can seem rather trite. 'Happy are those who mourn.' 'Happy are you when people revile you.' It seems hard to take either word at face value.

Ancient Hebrew often has a richer understanding in situations like this. There are a couple of words for blessing in Hebrew – *barak*, which literally means bow down, or *ashar*, which means 'to find the right road.' So, when Psalm 34 says "I will bless the Lord at all times," it's literally saying, "I will bow down before the Lord at all times." But when Psalm 1 says, "Blessed is the one who walks not in the way of the wicked," it's literally saying, "You are on the right road when you walk not in the way of the wicked."

This, I think, is how Jesus is using the word 'blessed' in the Beatitudes. "You are on the right road when you are poor in spirit." "You are on the right road when you are persecuted for righteousness' sake." "You are on the right road when

you are meek.” He’s not offering blessing in the sense of health or wealth, but telling us what it means to be children of God.

And when we hear the phrase, “blessed are those who mourn,” we might think Jesus is speaking about the sadness that accompanies the death of loved ones. But it’s more likely that Matthew has in mind the mourning of those who recognise that the present condition of the world is far from God’s ideal. We see injustice, exploitation, selfishness, cruelty and violence in the world, and we mourn. We ‘doom-scroll’ on our news feeds and we mourn. And Jesus promises that we will be comforted by discovering that the kingdom of heaven is open to us, and already within us, in a way that it will never be for powerful, rich, selfish people who assume God is on their side because of how mighty they are.

Jesus is speaking to a people, living under persecution and oppression, who had become used to the idea of salvation coming from the hands of mighty kings who would impose their will through violence. But Jesus insists that the right path is something that every person can find for themselves in the humblest of circumstances, and that the path remains open even during persecution, oppression, illness, poverty, or disaster.

It’s worth noticing that each line of the Beatitudes does implicitly acknowledge that the world is not currently in an ideal state. Each of them uses the future tense, pointing to some future benefit for following the path today. It’s not clear if this reward is on earth or in heaven, but since Jesus’ teaching is fundamentally about joining earth and heaven together in unity, we probably should expect that the answer is ‘both.’ For those following Jesus’ way, heaven is already here in our hearts, but it is also ‘not yet,’ because the fullness of heaven is yet to be experienced. The Beatitudes tell us that following Jesus’ path of love will lead to our transformation, and wherever that transformation occurs, heaven will be seen more clearly by all those around us. We become little beacons of heaven in a world seemingly ever growing in corruption, cruelty, inequality and despair

– exactly as it was in Jesus's own day of course, under Roman imperial domination.

As usual, in his sermon on the mount, Jesus turns traditional wisdom on its head. Most people would have said that it is the rich who are blessed, not the poor; it is the powerful who are blessed, not the meek; it is the strict enforcer of religious rules who is blessed, not the merciful; it is the victorious conqueror of other nations who is blessed, not the peacemaker. After all, who needs to make peace except the one who has been defeated?

In Jesus' day, just as today, being poor, being meek, being sick, needing the support of other people – all these things were basically shameful, almost a moral failure. Being poor or unwell or childless, for example, were seen as a punishment and curse from God, for something you'd done, or maybe something your ancestors had done. Conversely, being rich was seen as a reward and a blessing. God must love you if you are rich!

But those who receive God's favour are not the privileged classes. The Beatitudes are spoken to groups who have no achievements or status in society, simply because God chooses to be on the side of the weak, the forgotten, the despised, those longing for justice and mercy, the peacemakers and the compassionate.

Jesus is continually reversing conventional common sense. 'The first shall be last, and the last shall be first.' 'You aren't blessed by God if you're rich, you're blessed if you're poor, because there's so little getting in the way between you and the kingdom of God, and ultimately, the kingdom of God is the goal, not money, and not power.' Isn't this really the only goal in our religion – to grow the kingdom of God in the here and now, to unite Earth and Heaven, to make our little piece of earth as much like heaven as possible, not by enforced behaviour but by being transformed by God's love for us and then being that love for everyone we encounter?

It's important to be aware that the Beatitudes are not commandments. Jesus is not saying "you must become poor in spirit, or mourners, or persecuted for righteousness' sake;" rather, he is offering consolation to those who find themselves in those situations, who might be feeling that God has abandoned them. Far from it – for when you find yourself in those uncomfortable, unpleasant circumstances, that is when you are closest to God's love, with barely a breath separating you. After all, if you were rich, powerful, and able to meet all your own needs and desires, how often would you really give much attention to God's Kingdom, unless it's to fondly imagine how much of a spiritual success you must be to have received all these material blessings?

In the past, Christians have read the Beatitudes and concluded that these are new commandments to be achieved, and that we will be judged on how successfully we accomplish them. And that led to the idea that really, only monks and nuns can be truly worthy of God's kingdom. How sad that Jesus's words of comfort were turned into another set of threatening commandments that most would be destined to fail at? But that is what religion has tended to do over the centuries – to take God's comfort and mercy and turn it into commandment and punishment.

The end of our first reading from the prophet Micah shows us that this struggle has been going on for a long, long time: 'Will the Lord be pleased with thousands of rams, with ten thousands of rivers of oil? He has told you, O mortal, what is good, and what does the Lord require of you but to do justice and to love kindness and to walk humbly with your God?' Always we humans seem to want to take God's blessings and turn them back into strict commandments that we can impose on others. "You're not good enough for God," we think, both of others and of ourselves. But Jesus says, 'blessed are you who feel unworthy, who are poor in spirit, for yours in the kingdom of heaven.'