

Sunday Sermon

Revd Canon Charles Jenkin – 1st November 2020 – Feast of All Saints

Revelation 7.9-end; Psalm 34.1-10; 1 John 3.1-3; Matthew 5.1-12

Today we celebrate our place in the Communion of Saints, that community of both the living and also those in glory, who are held in the love of God and joined through faith in Jesus Christ. We celebrate the grace of God that enables ordinary, fallible human beings to become saints. And we celebrate what is the character of this glorious Communion. Although it is above all the joy of the Communion of Saints that we celebrate today, this is a community that also knows deep suffering and has lived through many hard times. This is perhaps an important reminder for us today.

No other passage in the Bible describes the character of Christian community more fully than the Beatitudes in St Matthew's Gospel. Matthew presents it as a sophisticated and subtle summary of Jesus' teaching and, like much of Jesus teaching, it is so surprising, and so radical, that it does need some unpacking. There are three particular keys to understanding what the Beatitudes really mean, and once you tune in like this, they are not so strange after all..

Firstly, the phrase, "Blessed are..." has a rich meaning. It describes both a state of happiness and a sense of being blessed by God. People can of course be happy without being blessed by God, but in the Beatitudes, people are happy very much because they are being blessed by God. It expresses what is already true, because people so described already know it; and it also expresses something that is growing. The Beatitudes express the way that people may anticipate even greater happiness and blessing, because they are becoming part of the Kingdom of God.

Secondly, the characteristics which are being so affirmed, are fundamentally to do with the character of God's Kingdom. They describe the character of people who will help the Kingdom grow. The Beatitudes cannot be understood without appreciating what the Kingdom of God is about; that it is a kingdom of justice, mercy, reconciliation, grace and peace. Moreover the Beatitudes cannot be seen clearly through a lens merely of personal spirituality. They are about community values, about how the community that it is the Kingdom of God is made.

Thirdly, all the Beatitudes refer first and foremost to Jesus and his ministry. They are about the character of Jesus, and the character of the mission to which he was called, and in which we are called to follow. So a good question to ask for each characteristic of the Kingdom, which the Beatitudes express, is, "How does Jesus exemplify this?" How do we see this characteristic in the life of Jesus?

Looked at like this, the Beatitudes start with the most surprising characteristics. How is Jesus poor in spirit, or in mourning, or meek? It sounds very strange! This is the man who heals hundreds, enthralled thousands, faces down the Pharisees, and challenges the religious authorities. How is that being meek?

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The characteristics actually get easier to appreciate as the list goes on. The last three when viewed in the light of Jesus are very clear. Jesus came to make peace between God and humanity. Jesus is the arch-peacemaker. And he expects to be resisted and mistreated like the prophets before him. But he is not downcast. These characteristics are very clearly about the way ahead for Jesus.

The three blessings in the middle, about hungering for true righteousness, about being merciful, and about being pure in heart, are all right there in the heart of Jesus teaching. He taught constantly about the kind of righteousness that God really looks for, not the self-justifying, virtue-signalling, strutting sort exemplified by the Pharisees, but the righteousness of quietly doing good and looking after the vulnerable and being merciful. Jesus taught constantly about the centrality of mercy.

Being pure in heart is an interesting one. What it doesn't mean is not having naughty thoughts or ever thinking about sex. Rather it means being pure in intention; not being devious or scheming or deceptive. In the bible the heart is where your true self lies, and what Jesus came to reveal is the true nature of God. What does pure in heart mean? Look at Jesus, and his purity of heart, and you will see God.

But let's return the first set of characteristics, the most surprising ones. How is Jesus poor in spirit? What it means is that even though Jesus was the most super spiritual person ever, he still knew his need of God, his utter dependence on God, if was to fulfil his mission and ministry. And if that was true for Jesus, how much more is it true for us too!

Then how is Jesus in mourning? Because he mourns for what the world should be like, and isn't. He mourns for what humanity has become. He mourns for what the people of God have become. He mourns because he loves humanity and longs for things to be better, for he has come to redeem humanity and grow a new Kingdom. Love and mourning are so often two sides of the same coin.

And the meekness? Well the meekness of Jesus lies in not seeking worldly power, in not seeking social status, but in seeking to be the one who serves rather be served, in being ready to associate with outsiders and sinners because they are the ones most in need. This meekness is not about being subservient and a pushover. It is about changing the world.

The Beatitudes are deeply exciting when viewed in this way. They are all exemplified in Jesus. They proclaim the real character of the Kingdom of God, and they are also a promise. They promise that when we allow ourselves to be caught up into this new community, this Communion of Saints, despite all the challenges we will find real blessing, we will find real happiness, and we will find real hope. This is the faith that sustained Jesus, and it will sustain us too. Amen.

CJ. I.II.20