

## THE BEATITUDES

Nicky Ing - 15th February 2004

Jeremiah 17:5-10, Psalm 1, 1 Corinthians 15: 12-20, Luke 6: 17-26

The Gospel reading for this morning may stir up in us a strange mixture of emotions, leaving us feeling confused.... Disturbed, perhaps....whilst at the same time, strangely comforted. We are presented with, on the one hand, blessing...and on the other hand, 'woe'. What is confusing for us may be that the blessed conditions that Jesus talks about may hardly seem 'blessed' at all, and the woeful situations seem to be much more desirable. It may seem that Jesus is telling us, that we should actively seek to be poor...or that we should weep more...or allow ourselves to get more persecuted. Strange advice indeed! But in fact if we look at the reading carefully we will see that Jesus is not giving commands here...he is simply describing reality, not telling the disciples, nor anybody else, to do anything. The Beatitudes, as these sayings are known, are not in fact about us...they are not a set of instructions on how we should live, or what we should do. Some people might suggest that the beatitudes are offered as ways to help people live well in the world...or at least as things we can **do** which will make the world a better place. It could be suggested that if we would only be spiritually poor, or hungry, or persecuted, that this will bring out good things in other people and sooner or later, people would realise how valuable we are...or better still, that the world will end up being a better place for everybody. Of course, Jesus knew perfectly well that the world just doesn't work like that...if you turn the other cheek, there is a strong possibility that you could be hit over again...and if you are poor, and disadvantaged, the chances are that you may not get far in business or in the world of politics...that is just how it is, on the whole...it's the way of the world.

But, in the Beatitudes, Jesus is telling us about **God**...who God is, who God blesses, and what the kingdom of God is like. He tells us what is important to **God**.....not about how the world works. Jesus is offering choices here...he is showing us a picture of God's values and God's priorities...as an alternative to the vision of life we usually carry along with us. He is offering us a different viewpoint, one that has its foundations, not in the world, but in the very nature of God. He asks us to choose LIFE...and it is no accident that this Gospel comes alongside the reading from Jeremiah 17...the prophet who lived and taught in Jerusalem in the sixth century before Christ...Jeremiah was contrasting the experience of being cursed, and being blessed...and trying to encourage people to turn wholeheartedly towards God.....in order to find **life**...life in its fullness....in beautiful language, he describes how a person who trusts in God's sustaining presence is like a tree planted by a river...God being the source of living water, purifying and life-sustaining, a symbol of forgiveness and of eternal life.....powerful imagery indeed.....and then the Psalm that we read together answers the question we may want to ask..... 'How does one keep the human heart steadfast in faithfulness to God?' by delighting in the Law of the Lord and continual devotion.....by responding to the love of God...by recognising our own need of God.....offering our own emptiness, trusting that we can be used in God's will...whatever the cost may be.... Jesus showed us the way of self-sacrifice...and as the Corinthians reading teaches us, as Christians we need to have a

faith in the Resurrection of Jesus Christ and a living relationship with him...**that** is the rootedness we need. It all has to do with our response, and our trust.

And yet the paradox is...that the message of Jesus may **not** be well received, and people who preach it may be persecuted.....killed, even, for their belief, as many Christians have been down the ages. Certainly Jeremiah, too, was hated by many for proclaiming God's word.....in fact he was eventually taken to exile in Egypt where he was stoned to death. Many of us here today would prefer to stay in our comfort zones...to get along with our neighbours...and not just to be at peace with other people.....it is of course even more comfortable to be popular! When the Beatles were at their height of popularity, more than 40 years ago, they claimed they were even more popular than Jesus! But the Gospel of Christ makes certain demands on us, if we take Jesus' teachings seriously.....that we should keep to the right path, and hold tightly to God.....even if this does lead to unpopularity, or persecution.....Archbishop Hurley, for instance, who died on Friday this week...dedicated enormous energy to the liberation struggle in this country...as indeed did many others...but in those days this took great inner strength and courage, and it certainly was not popular with the apartheid Government of that time. We honour his memory today, and give thanks for his commitment to the Gospel .....

Perhaps we need to reflect on some of the ways in which the Gospel of Christ contradicts aspects of our modern culture...small ways and bigger ways....and a question for us to consider is: if God is really like the Beatitudes portray God...and God's priorities and preferences are so different from the ways of the world as I know it...then what could that mean for me? How could my life be different.....How could **I** be different? That is a thought for us to wrestle with today and this week, particularly as we are coming very close to Ash Wednesday and the journey of Lent. (Ash Wednesday is on the 25th...in 10 days time) So Jesus leaves us this morning with an open-ended question....what are the ways in which we need to change our life priorities in order to move closer to the priorities of the Kingdom of God?? Perhaps it is an uncomfortable question for us, but Jesus does not always leave us feeling comfortable, does he....it is worth considering how we might answer his question. At the heart of all this, really, it seems to me that what we need is an ever-increasing measure of trust...because until we can trust God more fully, we shall always struggle to apply the values of the Kingdom of God in our lives....we shall continue to be 'caught', just as I said at the beginning, between the 'blessings' on the one hand, and the 'woes' on the other. Jesus invites us to trust him and follow him, so that through us, the Kingdom of God may continue to grow in his world. **Reflection**...Flor McCarthy:

*Lord Jesus, touch our eyes so that we may see the signs of your presence in our lives and in the world. Touch our ears so that we may hear your word. Touch our tongues so that we may profess our faith. Touch our hands so that we may give and receive. Touch our feet so that we may walk in your paths. Touch our minds so that we may understand your ways. Touch our wills so that they may be in tune with your will...and our hearts so that we may bring your love to our brothers and sisters, to the praise and glory of God.*

As we receive Him in the Eucharist today, let us empty our hearts of all that comes in the way of the relationship...all those things we hold onto so strongly.....old

resentments...past failures and disappointments, our anxieties, prejudices, and even just the over-busyness of life....and come in an attitude of openness and trust, to receive the amazing **gift of love** which He offers us...so that we may go out from here renewed, inspired, and strengthened to love and serve Him better. **Amen.**