

THE TRUE COST OF CHRISTIAN DISCIPLESHIP

Nicky Ing - 30th January 2005

Micah 6:1-8; Psalm 37:1-11; 1 Corinthians 1:18-31; Matthew 5:1-12

All the readings we have listened to this morning remind us that in order to be truly blessed we need to learn to trust and rely on God. Those who know their need of God, and who live life as God would want them to live it, are fortunate. God will give them all that they need. If we put our trust in human things we will be disappointed...because only God can fill our emptiness, and satisfy the hunger of the human heart. The passage from the Old Testament prophet Micah reminds us that there are three qualities that the Lord requires....'**to do justice, and to love kindness, and to walk humbly with your God.**' And Paul warns the Christians in Corinth that they should be careful not to become conceited with their own wisdom because God tends to choose what is weak and foolish by human standards...he uses people who are 'nothing at all' to show up those who are everything! Finally we have this beautiful passage from Matthew's Gospel, part of a series of Jesus' teachings that has been called the Sermon on the Mount.

It is interesting to notice that Jesus begins his teaching not with commandments, but with blessings, or Beatitudes (Attitudes of Being, they are also called.) He shares the wonder and the joy of what the kingdom of God means for our lives, now already, and in the future. The beatitudes are eight surprising ways, in which the kingdom comes to people who respond to God's action by a true conversion of heart. They speak of a variety of experiences, if you like, which we as disciples of Jesus may undergo as a result of our involvement in living the gospel. It might appear to the world as senseless suffering, foolish in the eyes of the world....but these beatitudes are not deliberate recipes for getting poor, or hungry, or mournful....or afflicted!! Jesus assures us that God heaps blessings on those who struggle to live out the truth of the gospel. The experiences that people go through as a result of doing things God's way, carry the promise that God can handle all these things, the poverty, the hunger, the tears, the rejection....he lifts his disciples out of them, he doesn't push us down....because he is a generous and loving God.

But indeed, the qualities Jesus wishes to see in his followers, qualities which were exemplified in his own life, are really a complete reversal of our conventional standards and values.

Society might say: Good for you if you are materially well-off, because you can buy whatever you want. People will look up to you and envy you!

Jesus would respond: ***You are happy if you know your need of God....that it is not how much you have in the bank that makes you rich....but it is what kind of a person you are...then you will be rich in God's eyes...and that is what matters.***

The world might say: You need to be tough, threatening and ruthless...people will be afraid of you, and you will get your own way.

Jesus says: ***You are blessed if you are gentle and kind....not trampling on the feelings of other people. Gentleness is in fact a form of strength, not weakness. There are many important tasks in life that only gentleness can accomplish.***

The world says: You are happy if you are greedy for power and status....you will be noticed and admired.

Jesus responds: ***Good for you if you have standards and values and are prepared to live up to them...it will be difficult for you, but you will be blessed.***

The world says: Happy are you if you can push over your opponent...and not show a scrap of mercy or forgiveness to others who may make mistakes. Keep on punishing others, don't let them forget that you are in charge and then nobody will dare to contradict you.

Jesus says: ***You will be blessed if you can make allowance for the failings of other people. Your greatness will be in your ability to forgive. God's mercy will be given to you.***

The world says: You absolutely ***must*** look good on the outside...keep up appearances!!! Keep ahead of the fashions in clothing and hairstyle, use the latest tooth whitener, and try and look just like the gorgeous models in the magazines!! And then you will be really with it!!

Jesus says: ***It is more important for you to have clean hearts...it is from the heart that all our thoughts, words and deeds flow...if the heart is clean, all that flows from it will be clean too, and pleasing to God. Outward things are just for show.***

The world needs to take notice of trouble makers, terrorists, warmongers...they are to be feared, because they kill innocent people, and they make big news.

But Jesus ***asks us to be peacemakers...to spread understanding among people, to welcome those who are different from us, to work for a fair and just society...in this way we will be children of God.***

The world might admire those who steal and cheat and get away with it; but Jesus says that ***we are blessed if we make a stand for what is right. It may make us unpopular and even ridiculed by others, but he says we will be blessed by God, and the wounds we may carry will be honourable wounds.*** It must be so difficult for people who take a stand against those who abuse women and children...it takes great courage for a woman or young girl to report a rape case, for instance...we have seen such terrible things in our newspapers this past week concerning the killing of innocent children, and those who sexually molest children; there seems to be so much of it in the world.... justice needs to

be done and people who do harm to others have to be apprehended, and prevented from continuing. But it still takes courage...I often wonder if we pray enough for the police who have to handle these cases, and the magistrates and judges who have to sentence criminals...They must come under a lot of strain.

The best commentary we can find on the beatitudes is in the life of Jesus himself. Jesus gives up power and prestige to deliberately follow the way of humility and powerlessness. He is gentle with the kind of people that others would write off as hopeless. He grieves when he sees how many people choose to be blind or deaf when God visits them. He experiences hunger...not just bodily hunger but the hunger that can only be satisfied by doing what is right. Jesus scandalises the religious authorities of his day because he is **always** ready with mercy and forgiveness...he is persecuted for that and often goes through times of hurt and ridicule, and even terror. In the end he is abused and condemned in the cause of right and is handed over to death. But in all this Jesus is blessed because God raises him on the third day...

Perhaps in all this we are invited today to consider the true cost of Christian discipleship. It is costly, it is **not** always comfortable. If we look back to the verse that we highlighted in the beginning, from the prophet Micah....(Ch.6:8) **He has told you, O mortal, what is good; and what does the Lord require of you but to do justice, and to love mercy, and to walk humbly with your God?** Jesus says that being merciful counts for more than just about anything else. Our God is The God of mercy. Those who experience that God is merciful are freed, themselves, to show mercy. That means forgiving those who hurt us, and loving them. No, it isn't easy...In the end, I believe, it all has to do with **walking with God**. It is that simple: we are called to do justice, to love mercy, and to walk humbly. We don't need to have wisdom, or power, or pride for that. And yes, it may seem foolish in the eyes of the world. But by the way we behave, perhaps, people will see something of Christ reflected in us...his justice, his loving kindness, and his humility...and maybe they will ask us to tell them more about Jesus.....so that the world may see in all our transformed lives something of the power and wisdom and love of God. That is the ideal....How will you and I walk with God, in this coming week? That is something we can each consider for ourselves, as we move into an attitude of prayer. May we ask God to help us reflect the qualities of Jesus in our lives, and follow him more faithfully and prayerfully day by day. **AMEN**