

Sunday 4A 2023
SFX

Hearing the Beatitudes today reminds me of the warning C. S. Lewis made about the wonderful language of King James Bible: "Beauty exalts, but beauty also lulls."

We may be lulled this morning by the poetry of a beautiful and reassuring text like the Beatitudes and touched by Christ's praise of the meek and the merciful and its promise of divine blessing. But we might fail to engage with the strangeness of the text and its provocative and challenging content.

Jesus climbs the hill and begins his most famous instruction, the so-called 'Sermon on the Mount'. Neitzche thought it to be the *folly of Christianity*, that made it a religion of weaklings. For Ghandi these are the words *that most endeared him to Jesus*. For us? What do we make of it? We nod politely to this 'Magna Carta of Christianity,' this 'Gospel within the Gospel.' We might be genuinely moved by it. But as Pope Benedict said, "*as children of our time we feel an inner resistance to it.*" Isn't it just a Utopian ideal that in part is difficult or even unliveable.

Although as individuals and as a church we might fail to live the Beatitudes they remain a touchstone of the Kingdom. We need Christ to speak his counter-intuitive wisdom into our mad world where there is evident greed, injustice and violence. Each individual Beatitude requires careful thought; they are paradoxes to make us think differently.

For Matthew, Christ is the new Moses, climbing the mount as Moses climbed Sinai. But here Christ gives the word – he does not receive it from heaven on stone tablets. He sits, speaks with authority. But what he offers is not a new list of commandments, or requirements. He is not saying 'You must be poor' or 'you must mourn', although he commends a spiritual value there. No, these are not commandments. It is a wild, crazy, act of imagination to help us envision a different way of living and being, a world shaped by God's Kingdom. He is offering us an alternative way of **seeing** to help us shape our identity and form our community.

The Beatitudes are said to call us to the heights of spiritual perfection. Yet there is something odd. What they offer seems to be the very **antithesis of achievement and success**. This is one of the great paradoxes of the New Testament. Christianity is not a matter of pulling ourselves together and being the sort of impressive characters who always get things right. We have to learn the art of weakness and to realise that in weakness we find our strength.

St Paul had to learn it. Wrestling with the mysterious 'thorn in his flesh' he heard Christ say "*My grace is sufficient for you, for power is made perfect in weakness... When I am weak, then I am strong*" he told the Corinthians. (2 Cor 12:7-10) It is the foolish, the weak, those that seem common and contemptible, these are the people of the Beatitudes.

When later in Matthew's Gospel the disciples ask Jesus *who is the greatest in the Kingdom of Heaven-* he set before them a little child. Surely it is no mistake that the

scene with the child is juxtaposed with the story of the rich young man, who is evidently a good man, seems to have everything, has kept the commandments since his youth. The Lord loves him but sends him away with a flea in his ear.

He wanted to discover something he could **DO** in order to inherit eternal life. But there is nothing any of us can do. We must simply receive the kingdom of God like a child.

We must learn the art of weakness. *"When I am weak, then I am strong"*. There is a way of being in the world that is **STRONG**, precisely because it is not aggressive and grasping, it is strong in resisting violence and refusing to return evil for evil. There is a way of being that does not exploit power over others, but is empowering of others. For Jesus, this way of weakness is our strength.

Jesus says *'Blessed are the gentle'* or as it is sometimes translated as *'Blessed are the meek.'* The meek are not people with heads hung low, passively accepting the role of victim. The Greek word *praous* denotes a gentleness flowing from inner strength. Blessed are we when we are so strong in our inner selves that we do not have to be grasping, 'on the make' and 'have it now' at the expense of others. *'Blessed are the merciful'* Blessed are we refrain from taking advantage. We will be like the woman who tenderly washed the feet of Jesus and was shown mercy in return. *Blessed are the pure in heart.* Blessed are we when our hearts have been purged of deceit and aggressiveness that blocks our view of God. Then we see God.

Seeing differently, re-envisioning the world seems to be what the Beatitudes are about. If we compare Matthew's Beatitudes with Luke's harder-edged version we see that Matthew spiritualizes them. So when Luke says *"Blessed are you poor"*, Matthew says *"Blessed are the poor in spirit."* Whatever the outward circumstances, Matthew seems to want us to interiorize the values of the Kingdom. St Paul understood this. He told the Corinthians *"Though I sell all my goods and have not love, I am worth nothing."* Yes, there is a blessing in detachment, but it is the attitude that we bring to things that matters.

Matthew makes the Beatitudes an attitude of mind. St Paul simply says "in your minds you must be the same as Christ Jesus. Yes in him we see the Beatitudes not as an unfathomable text but a lived reality. He, the one who is meek and humble of heart, who had nowhere to lay his head, and who turned the other cheek, teaches us to learn from this way of weakness and to find the strength of God. We can read the Beatitudes as a description of Jesus, and simply pray today that we may be like him.