

So we continue our journey through Matthew's gospel following the life of Jesus. Last week we had Jesus on a team building exercise as he called his first four disciples, although having said that, the only other disciple we hear about the calling of in this gospel, is Matthew. So I rather suspect by this stage most, if not all, of the disciples are called. And then at the end of chapter 4 there is a very brief summary of the beginning of Jesus' ministry covering preaching, healing and large crowds.

And then we arrive at our reading with this apparently just descriptive sentence, but one that contains so much.

"Now when he saw the crowds, he went up on a mountainside, and sat down."

And part of that sentence leads us to the description often given to what will follow in the next two and a half chapters – and that is, of course, the sermon on the mount. When you think about it, though, could there be a duller title for what is such an amazing, well, sermon. I could try it. This morning I am preaching to you the sermon in the church. Is it just a dull description or is there more to this – and of course there is more.

Throughout the Bible, mountains are significant as sacred, spaces where heaven and earth meet; they serve as primary locations for divine revelation. Think of Moses meeting God up a mountain; Jesus often went up into the mountains to pray; the transfiguration was up a mountain. Mountains were considered special places, so therefore Jesus went up a mountain to do – well what did he do? The first thing he did was sit down. When a Jewish Rabbi was teaching officially he sat down to teach: a rabbi may give instructions when he was standing or walking about but his really official teaching was done when seated. So Jesus, to indicate that he is teaching, sat down. And Matthew's readers, the Jewish people, would understand that.

The next point about this first sentence is that he saw the crowds, but they didn't follow him up the mountainside – just his disciples came to him – which is why I think most, if not all his team of disciples were in place. This sermon on the mount was not to everyone. It was the teaching he gave to his disciples. As you read this sermon you get sections starting, "You have heard that", "You have heard that it was said", "It has been said". And what Jesus is doing is training his team. "When you hear such and such said then this how you should respond." This is quite deep theological training aimed at his team, not at the general masses.

Last point about this sermon before we get into it. This is not one sermon. It can't be. I remember 'sermon writing lessons' at college and they talked about no more than three points. Well, I'm sorry but there are a lot more than three points in this sermon. There has been a serious editing job here and what you find in the sermon on the mount is Matthew's summary of what Jesus taught his disciples in all their theology classes

Our reading this morning is then, mainly, something that we call the Beatitudes. Beatitudes means supreme blessedness, and they are a brilliant, incredibly radical set of descriptions or facets of people which most people would see as real problems, and Jesus is saying that they are anything but.

Before we have a look at them what about that word, 'Blessed'. The word bless is one that has crept more and more into modern day conversation. You see a child doing something cute. "Oh bless him". Or perhaps you see an elderly person struggling – "Oh bless her". And I wonder what we really mean – is there a deep meaning to the use of that word 'bless' or are we just saying, "I want to say something nice and supportive about what I have just seen but I'm not quite sure what"?

But the word blessed here means much more than that. In the Greek, in which the New Testament was written, the word is Makarios. The meaning of Makarios can best be seen from one particular usage of it.

The Greeks always called Cyprus he makaria (which is the feminine form of the adjective makarios), which means The Happy Isle, and they did so because they believed that Cyprus was so lovely, so rich, and so fertile that a person would never need to go beyond its coastline to find the perfect happy life. It had such climate, such flowers and fruits and trees, such minerals, such natural resources that it contained within itself all the materials for perfect happiness.

Makarios then describes that joy which has its secret within itself, that joy which is serene and untouched. A word that is sometimes used instead of blessed is happy, but human happiness is something that is dependant on the chances and the changes of life, something which life may give and life may destroy. But makarios is simply there and is untouched. So that is what Blessed means. It is a feeling, a sense that we have which is totally God given, that people cannot change, a supreme form of happiness.

So are these 'Blessed' statements just a random set of encouragements? No they are not. Remember, the whole sermon on the mount is aimed at believers – hence Jesus teaching his disciples, and these beatitudes are a sequential set of steps, if you like, a sequential development in the life of the believer from their very first understanding that they are a sinner and in need of salvation to the point where they may eventually be persecuted for their faith. What Jesus is doing here is teaching his disciples – and therefore also teaching us – one of the hardest things we are called to do – how to bring someone to faith in Jesus Christ. These steps are how we do that, how we journey with someone to help them accept Jesus as their Saviour.

The first step: Blessed are the poor in spirit, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven. This is recognising where we start from. At the beginning of our journeys, we have no knowledge of Jesus; we have no faith; we have no understanding. The word that is translated as poor here does not mean someone for whom money is very tight; it means someone who is destitute. If they receive no handout that day they will starve. They have nothing. At the start of someone's Christian journey this means that someone realises that they have nothing if they stay separated from God, they know they are doing things wrong in their lives, they know they need help, and what Jesus is saying is that Kingdom of God is there for them. That person has reached the foot of the steps. Paul talked about this in his letter to the Ephesians when, talking to them about the time before they accepted Jesus as their saviour, he said this:

"remember that at that time you were separate from Christ, excluded from citizenship in Israel and foreigners to the covenants of the promise, without hope and without God in the world."

And this first step is so important because if someone doesn't recognise that they are poor in spirit, that they need some help in their life, they will never come to faith.

So now we are there we can go up a step. "Blessed are those who mourn for they will be comforted." What are we mourning? All those things that we did wrong. We were just living for our pleasure, not caring about who we hurt, just seeing what we can get out of life and we start to feel sorry for all the ridiculously stupid, foolish, sinful, things that we have done in this life. We were living because we thought this was all there was, and we just wanted pleasure, and more stuff. We ruined things and our sin weighs so much upon us that we begin to sorrow, to mourn all those lost opportunities.

So up another step. "Blessed are the meek, for they will inherit the earth." Here we need to understand what Jesus means by meekness. Meekness is a work of the Spirit in the life of an individual so that they can see who they truly are. It is not a cowering individual recoiling from a threat – that is not what this meekness is. It is an acceptance by the person that they don't deserve anything good but with Jesus they can have something good, and they are ready for that. So a real turning point.

And the next step talks about another step forward. "Blessed are those who hunger and thirst for righteousness, for they will be filled." Another word we need to understand is righteousness – a right relationship with God. In order to have that relationship we had to get to that first step first – now we have moved up a few steps we are ready to learn, to read the scriptures, to learn from the word of God. We are seeking righteousness, and when we find it that hunger and thirst will be satisfied and we will be filled.

Next step: "Blessed are the merciful, for they will be shown mercy." When someone is shown mercy then there is the recognition that the person deserves punishment, but despite that, they are not given the punishment. Others, as part of the State for example, may give out punishment, but we don't. What this step is saying that we deserve, if you like, a spiritual punishment but we don't receive it because Jesus took it on our behalf on the cross.

And then, "Blessed are the pure in heart, for they will see God." We are getting to be in a good place here. Here we have an acceptance that we can still make mistakes, and when we do we know we can call out to God again and we will be forgiven. Let's face it we all get things wrong sometimes, and we need to go to God and say, "I am sorry but I have messed up" and when we do that, when we have the honesty and courage to do what we know we must do, we will see God.

Blessed are the peacemakers, for they will be called children of God.

And here the circle has started again as the person we have guided up the steps is now with someone else at the bottom of the steps. We have received the peace of God and we are ready to help someone receive that peace, we are ready to share what we have, what we know, and do you know, that is what the Beatitudes is all about.

But they do finish with a warning. "Blessed are those who are persecuted because of righteousness, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven." Not everyone wants to hear what we have to say, the good news of Jesus Christ that I have been taking us up those steps of the Beatitudes to explain, and we will get criticism, and unpleasantness when people reject that message. But never, never, never, forget verse 12 of our reading.

"Rejoice and be glad, because great is your reward in heaven, for in the same way they persecuted the prophets who were before you."

So there you have it. Here is a brilliant example of what the scriptures can do for us. They can help us to guide people to knowing and loving God – because that is our goal, our aim in life, to share with those we meet, the good news of Jesus Christ, the Son of God. The bible is the best tool we have to achieve that goal – but it is just a tool. It is the relationship we have with God, through his Son Jesus Christ, that matters most.

I pray that we can all, when the time is right, journey with someone who is looking for something else in their life, up those steps of the journey of faith in Jesus Christ, and bring real blessings, real Makarios, into their lives.

Amen

Reading: Matthew 5: 1-12

Title: Steps

St George's Thriplow

Day: Epiphany 4

Sermon Series: Jesus' life according to Matthew

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