

Epiphany 3A: Micah 6.1-8, Psalm 27.1-10, 1 Cor 1.10-18, Matthew 4.12-25

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As I said last week for the next 4 to 5 weeks we are going to be having a close look at the Sermon on the Mount. The sermon runs over 3 chapters of Matthews gospel but we will mostly be concentrating on the first, chapter 5. As we follow a lectionary we only get this opportunity once every three years and as Lent starts late this year we get to read the sermon almost in its entirety. My sermons on this will definitely be up on the website so if you want to revisit any points you can find them. Alternatively you could take notes and I certainly encourage you to look in the pew bibles as I am talking if you need to. You might find it vastly more interesting than anything I might say!

To start with I'll begin with a couple of quotes.

Omar Nelson Bradley, one of the most famous American Generals of World II said this: *"We live in a world of nuclear giants and ethical infants, in a world that has achieved brilliance without wisdom, power without conscience. We have solved the mystery of the atom and forgotten the lessons of the Sermon on the Mount. We know more about war than we know about peace, more about dying than we know about living."*

Mahatma Ghandi also famously spoke of the way Jesus teachings were un-lived and unpracticed. Although he was a devout Hindu, he was widely known to admire Jesus and he often quoted from the Sermon on the Mount. Once when the missionary E. Stanley Jones met with Ghandi he asked him, *"Mr. Ghandi, though you quote the words of Christ often, why is that you appear to so adamantly reject becoming his follower?"* Ghandi replied, *"Oh, I don't reject your Christ. I love your Christ. It's just that so many of you Christians are so unlike your Christ."*

And the well-known theologian and biblical scholar, John Stott said, *"The Sermon on the Mount is probably the best-known part of the teaching of Jesus, though arguably it is the least understood, and certainly it is the least obeyed"*

Well, my plan is to try and shed a little more light on the Sermon and take it as seriously as possible as we move into the year ahead. I would like to think we could prove Bradley, Ghandi and Stott wrong and become people who really do shine as people who live this profound teaching.

I have a theme in mind for these talks that I hope will become obvious as we travel through the chapter but we need to put the sermon into context first.

Matthew's Gospel up to this point has been at pains to point out that Jesus is the Messiah, the fulfillment of the promises to Abraham. The gospel was written for a community of Jewish Christians and the creative references to Jesus genealogy at the beginning of the Gospel plus the quotes from the Hebrew Scriptures in the first 4 chapters are all meant to support Matthew's argument. In last weeks reading we heard how Jesus called his first disciples – Peter, Andrew, John and James – and how he went throughout the country proclaiming, *"Repent, for the Kingdom of Heaven is near"*. He began to heal and teach and crowds of people began to follow him. The Kingdom of God is absolutely central to Jesus teaching and now in chapter 5 he begins to explain to his disciples what this Kingdom looks like.

For Matthew's Jewish listeners the way he has set the beginning of the sermon up would have rung many bells. Jesus seeing the crowds, goes up a mountain. He sits down, his disciples join him, in the Greek he literally opens his mouth and begins to teach. Like Moses who delivered the commandments of the Old Law on Mount Sinai, Jesus delivers the new commandments of the new beginning, the new heaven and earth, on this mountain. Like Kings and rulers of old he sits enthroned, holding court and imparting judgment and knowledge. Like the Rabbis of his time he is seated when he teaches and like Abraham who was promised by God that his descendents would be a blessing to the whole world, Jesus begins his teaching by declaring who will be blessed in God's Kingdom.

Given the Kingdom of God or the Kingdom of Heaven was so central to Jesus message and this collection of his sayings it is worth saying something about its nature. The Kingdom of God is a BIG concept and there have been numerous debates about what it actually is. You cannot really pin it down and in the end you have to experience and live it to really begin to understand. But for the sake of this argument I am going to suggest it is three things:

Firstly, it is the restored relationship with God, through Jesus Christ, and an ever-deepening intimacy and union with God.

Secondly it is a real, tangible, lived experience on this earth and coming to this earth characterized by justice, compassion, and mercy and above all love.

Thirdly it is Jesus Christ himself who embodies the Kingdom and in whose body we live in the Kingdom and the Kingdom becoming.

So the Kingdom is a real relationship, a real place and a real person. This is a whole other sermon or three but for now it is important to get both the importance and the tangible nature of the Kingdom because the Sermon on the Mount has been called the Magna Carter of this Kingdom or The Manifesto of the King.

However, this manifesto is not a set of ethical commands although it is clearly about ethics. It is not a list of rules and regulations although when you first read it or hear it that is how it may seem. A list of rules that seem next to impossible I might add. In fact if we take the Sermon on the Mount as primarily about morality then we will indeed fail and hit a dead end. We will also turn off countless others as we go on about good and bad behaviour, particularly when they see our poor attempts.

Archimandrite George who is the Abbot of St Gregorias on Mount Athos, Greece, writes that guidance that only aims for moral improvement is anthropocentric, it is centered on man where human effort dominates, and not the Grace of God. It then seems as if it is our own morality that saves us, and not God's grace. He believes that living a life of faith in these conditions does not give us genuine experiences of God and his Kingdom, therefore our souls are not truly satisfied because its thirst remains unquenched.

The Sermon on the Mount is instead about the heart. It is about our attitude and way of being in the world. At the core of it what really counts is not what we possess or have done but who we are and who we are becoming. Archimandrite George, like countless orthodox theologians would say it is about the process of theosis, being united with God and sharing in the Life or Nature of the Holy Trinity. The Sermon is then about virtues, the quality of our character. It was Aristotle who was the first recorded person to make the link between virtue and morality. He taught that people have to acquire virtues before they can successfully understand right and wrong and lead an ethical life. Scriptures tell us we need to get into a right relationship with God and be growing into the likeness of Christ before we can live the

values of the Kingdom. Perhaps this is why Christians have so often failed to put the Sermon on the Mount into practice. Maybe we have been putting the cart before the horse and have been treating the sermon as a list of morals instead of as a window into our own hearts and the transformative power of the gospel.

It is telling then that the first words of Jesus are the Beatitudes. When you hear the word 'beatitude' think kingdom virtues and rejoicing. You can also think be – attitude – for they are about our attitude, our inner state. The beatitudes, like the whole of the sermon, are in fact addressed to Christ's followers. This is about individual Christians and the church getting their own house in order before they start moralizing about other people and groups. But is it not so much easier to look outwards than within?

The Greek word *makarioi* translated in our bible as blessing also means being happy and rejoicing which is why in some translations 'happy' is used instead of 'blessing'. The word 'blessing' is used to emphasize that this is a spiritual reality and not just a result of human effort. It is said that the nine beatitudes that Jesus lists are really the summation of the whole Sermon on the Mount. They describe the nature of God's Kingdom, they reveal what the virtues and qualities are like of those in the Kingdom and they teach what actions and behaviors are required for a person to be part of the kingdom becoming. They also turn everything upside down. This is of course the nature the Kingdom – it radically reframes relationships and society.

You see in this Kingdom, this place, it is not the strong, the successful, the beautiful, the thin, the wealthy, those with high IQ's or the satisfied who are blessed, who have cause to rejoice. Instead it is the poor in spirit, those who mourn, the meek, the hungry for right, the merciful, the pure in heart, the peacemakers and the persecuted who rejoice for they inherit and inhabit the Kingdom.

- The poor in spirit are those who know and accept their humble reliance on God. Unlike Luke's first beatitude this is one for all of us - the poor, the rich, the in-between. What is required first is to remember humbly our reliance on God and our subservience to his will.
- In the context of the Kingdom and Jesus teaching those who mourn are those who feel deeply the anguish and pain of the world - who see the brokenness and sinfulness of humanity and grief for the suffering of the whole earth. It is not just about being sad about something or someone we have lost. It is grieving for the pain of the whole world. (prayer ropes – tassels)
- The meek are humble and gentle in their dealings with others because they have humbled themselves before the greatness of God.
- Those who thirst for righteousness are not those who long to be holy but those who long to see right prevail, to see justice, to see the right thing done.
- The merciful are those who give compassionately to the poor, who do not withhold in their hearts and hands what they are able share.
- The pure in heart are those whose devotion to God is clear and focused. They are not double minded and do not attempt to serve both God and mammon – mere wealth.
- The peacemakers are those who devote themselves to the hard work of reconciling hostile individuals, families, groups and nations.
- And those who are persecuted are those who suffer misunderstanding, slander and violence because they are attempting to truly put the teachings of Jesus into practice.

And it is hard to do this consistently and well which is why the second half of each beatitudes is so important for they are words of encouragement and support when it all seems impossible or too painful. The beatitudes are so beloved I think because they are such powerful words of hope and comfort. They touch us deeply because they speak to the best part of us and the most needy part. They say that if we seek the Kingdom no matter the cost then we will rejoice and be glad.

I said earlier that the Sermon on the Mount was not a list of rules and regulations. Instead it was the teaching of Jesus that opens up the nature of God's Kingdom. It is a teaching that describes the inner disposition and the virtues of Christ's followers, those who are called to inhabit, inherit and proclaim the Kingdom. It tells us that the Kingdom is a place of justice, compassion, love and rejoicing. It is a teaching that helps us in our journey of ever-deepening union with God. Over the next 4 Sundays I plan to look at more of the virtues and qualities and the actions required in God's Kingdom but for now, today, we give thanks and rejoice for Christ our resurrected Lord who taught us, who is the wisdom of God, and who redeems, sanctifies and empowers us. Amen