

The Sermon on the Mount. LIVING WELL – it's upside down.

When I was at university one of the subjects that we studied was HISTOLOGY – not the the study of 'hists' – rather the study of cells.

We would look at the larger picture to get the CONTEXT – say of the kidney or lung, then use a microscope to look at the more detailed cellular structure of how the different types of cell might interact with one another, and then swivel the lens to a more powerful one so we could focus down to an individual cell for a more detailed picture.

Today is the beginning of a series stretching out over the next 8 weeks where we are going to be looking at the Sermon on the Mount and the 10 Commandments.

This morning we will have a look at the context of the Sermon on the Mount as a whole, narrow it down to the first part which we have had in our reading – referred to as the Beatitudes - and then with a more powerful lens if you like, focus on the first pair of Beatitudes found in verses 3 and 4.

It is helpful to understand something of the context in which we find the Sermon on the Mount, early in Mathew's account of Jesus life and teaching, and paralleled to a degree in Luke's account, although there are significant variations. Luke's is a much shorter account.

Following his baptism and temptation in the wilderness, Jesus has started to gather his inner circle to him (*Simon Peter, Andrew, James and John are the only 4 mentioned thus far by Matthew*) and has begun his ministry, proclaiming the GOOD NEWS that God's Kingdom - promised through the Old Testament - was now on the threshold, and he was healing the sick, setting free those bound by Satan and offering comfort.

It is at this point that Jesus seems to want to draw aside from the crowds and go up a mountainside, sitting down in a manner familiar to them as that of a rabbi or teacher.

[As Jimmy Cricket, famous comedian, awarded a Papal Knighthood last year, might say, "come closer."]

Some commentators have drawn a parallel between the actions of Jesus and those of Moses – both going 'up'.

Exodus 19:20 – “the LORD called Moses to the top of the mountain”

Moses relays to the people the 10 commandments he has received **from** God which he then expands in his teaching of the Law;

Jesus **as** God describes these 8 Beatitudes, and then expands on their principles through the rest of the Sermon on the Mount.

Yet there is a difference - a difference between the Law and Grace.

Where the 10 Commandments may seem more negative – ‘Thou shalt not...’ the Beatitudes seem more positive – ‘You are blessed...’

In his book on living the 10 commandments in the 21st century J John links them like this:

[quote J John page 14]

I love the idea in Gerard Kellys’ book, HUMANIFESTO, in which he likens the Old Testament to the underground running beneath the city that is the Sermon on the Mount – you can ignore it and enjoy the landscape, but exploring it helps enhance our understanding of what was in Jesus mind, how there are connections between these ideas, and the parallels he drew.

We may recall, when asked by the Pharisees in Matthew chapter 22 which is the greatest commandment Jesus, quoting from Deuteronomy, replied that it was to:

“Love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind.”.

If you do this, then all else will fall into place.

Oswald Chambers says of the Sermon on the Mount:

“[it] is not a set of principles to be obeyed apart from (or **separate from**) identification with Jesus Christ. The Sermon on the Mount is a statement of the life we WILL live when the Holy Spirit is getting his way with us”.

Jesus encapsulates the key characteristics of those who want to follow HIS way – the values that those who follow him are called to live by – will WANT to live by, because of knowing him and being in a relationship with him.

Gerrard Kelly describes it as God’s blueprint for human behaviour; designed not to make us better Christians, but to make us better human beings.

[Robert Warren in his book Living Well suggest that] the Beatitudes address the question of how faith in Jesus Christ is to be given expression in daily (not Sundays-in-church) living – Monday to Saturday living - so that the world around experiences the benefit of living in the wake of the practice of these values.

We are spending the next few weeks in each of our services looking at this wonderful piece of Christian literature. It is inevitable that we are only scratching the surface, and can I encourage you to explore it more deeply each week.

Gerard Kelly writes this:

“Even within the New Testament canon – a body of literature rich in its significance and depth - the Sermon on the Mount stands out. And within the Sermon the part that stands out as the heart of the enterprise is the passage from verse 1 to verse 16 of chapter 5”

So now, as if I was back in my histology lab in King’s College, lets adjust the microscope and focus on today’s passage, as in your notice sheet.

In the early church there were 3 key – central – texts, that new Christians would learn –

- the Creed – what it is we ***believe***;
- the Lord’s Prayer – how we ***pray*** or speak with the Father and
- the Beatitudes – how to ***live*** the way God wants us to, the CHARACTER of a citizen of the Kingdom that Jesus proclaimed though out his ministry on Earth.

So what can we understand today of these beginning verses in Matthew’s account?

As a piece of literature these 8 verses are quite beautiful.

Challenging and mysterious

Impossible to fully explain, but impossible to entirely ignore.

The most obvious stand-out word is BLESSED

What does that mean? The Greek word is *makarios* (μακαριῶς)

A state of happiness and wellbeing – but MORE than this

It is something of a spiritual joy and involves the out pouring of God’s love, affirmation, support and generosity

Each of the Beatitudes has at its heart a kingdom characteristic, trait or value

And they are as counter-cultural today as they were 2000 years ago.

How on earth can the poor in spirit be blessed? Be happy?

The bereaved?

The meek?

The persecuted and oppressed?

This is surely upside-down thinking.

But rather than 'how on earth?' it is 'how in God's kingdom?'

Because Jesus is describing the promises of God – and these blessings all involve participation in the Kingdom of God.

The 1st and the last promise something NOW – the kingdom of heaven is theirs NOW

The other 6 promise something of the kingdom of heaven in the future – 'they will...'

And here we find the paradox of Jesus teaching.

The Kingdom is here NOW and is NOT YET fully present.

Comparing the teaching of Jesus here with the instruction of Moses in Exodus we find we are in the realm of GRACE rather than LAW.

These verses overflow with affirmation – an accepting love – a reassurance.

The foundations of the Kingdom are BLESSING – GIFT – HOPE – ENCOURAGEMENT – GRACE - JUSTICE

Jesus himself is the role model for us in every aspect of our lives – WWJD?

And he modelled the Beatitudes for us in his life and teaching.

Many have said that they represent an impossible dream, but that misses the point.

They are a description of how – through God's grace – through the power of the Holy Spirit in our lives – we will want to live – how a child of the Kingdom will be desperate for righteousness **because** of their relationship with Jesus and may themselves suffer **because** of that passion.

The first Beatitude – v3

“Blessed are the poor in Spirit for theirs is the Kingdom of Heaven”

This is NOT saying that it is holy to be poor

To put oneself down

To grovel

But it IS about trusting in God

Knowing that without God we are incomplete

And acknowledging our need

It is a contrast to those who are spiritually proud, who are self-sufficient.

It is in our emptiness that God is able to fill us, and to give us the kingdom of heaven.

'Blessed are those who know their NEED of God; all life opens up before them'

John Stott writes that

"God's rule, which brings salvation, is a gift as absolutely free as it is utterly undeserved"

For the poor everything is a gift.

The second Beatitude

"Blessed are those who mourn, for they will be comforted"

This is NOT primarily about the grief of bereavement for a person who has died;

About being a 'kill joy' – long faced – judgmental; Pesimistic.

Jesus overflowed with hope and confidence and joy.

It IS about feeling the pain and injustice in the world;

Feeling GOD's pain;

Owning OUR share of the problem

Facing our pain – other's pain.

John Stott explains that it is not the sorrow of bereavement but the sorrow of repentance to which Christ refers.

Facing the reality of our human predicament

Owning our part in the wider pain, injustice and suffering in our society.

Acknowledging the gap between the present reality and the perceived good.

The word 'comforted' may be better thought of as 'strengthened'.

The Holy Spirit is described as 'the comforter' in some translations, but one of his roles is to strengthen and to come along side.

We have several accounts of Jesus weeping in the Gospels, and as he models these Beatitudes so we find that he is comforted – strengthened

He wept over the death of his friend Lazarus, but was comforted knowing the will of the Father

He wept over the city of Jerusalem, painfully aware of the gap between God's desire for the city and its rejection of his message of hope, but was comforted in knowing that his sacrifice would allow the Gospel message to spread abroad

He wept in the Garden of Gethsemane, at the prospect of the suffering he had to submit to, and was comforted by an Angel appearing to bring him strength.

Dietrich Bonhoeffer wrote:

“A Christian is someone who shares the sufferings of God in the world”.

We are called to be involved.

Who then are the mourners? The mourners are those who have caught a glimpse of God's new day, who ache with all their being for that day's coming, and who break out into tears when confronted with its absence. They are the ones who realize that in God's realm of peace there is no one blind and who ache whenever they see someone unseeing. They are the ones who realize that in God's realm there is no one hungry and who ache whenever they see someone starving. They are the ones who realize that in God's realm there is no one falsely accused and who ache whenever they see someone imprisoned unjustly. They are the ones who realize that in God's realm there is no one who fails to see God and who ache whenever they see someone unbelieving. They are the ones who realize that in God's realm there is no one who suffers oppression and who ache whenever they see someone beat down. They are the ones who realize that in God's realm there is no one without dignity and who ache whenever they see someone treated with indignity. They are the ones who realize that in God's realm of peace there is neither death nor tears and who ache whenever they see someone crying tears over death. The mourners are aching visionaries.'

Nicholas Wolterstorff, 'Lament for a Son'

Like the Samaritan in the story Jesus told, who seeing the victim of assault was moved to action.

Where we have the courage to acknowledge our spiritual poverty, to face the causes of the world's pain and suffering, we will receive God's grace and God's strength to respond.

Jesus promised the Kingdom of God – an upside-down Kingdom, and he identified himself as the promised messiah from Isaiah chapter 61:

“The Lord has anointed me to preach GOOD NEWS to the poor....to comfort those who mourn”

It is those who have nothing who look to God for salvation, knowing that they need everything.

You and I have been called to God's Kingdom.

We are called to be agents of that Kingdom now – here.

We are called to be wholly dependent on God, feeling his grief for his world.

I encourage you to read and maybe to re-read these 3 chapters of Matthew during the next weeks. Look at different translations. If you don't have a bible at home please speak to me.

Ask God to speak to you through his word and allow yourself to be changed by his Holy Spirit.

Father Son and Holy Spirit, Maker, Messiah and Motivator,

Be with us as we climb the paths of these texts, and may the message from the mountain speak to us with fresh insight, renewed vigour and new power.

Amen

Paul Barton
5th June 2016