



Reading: Matthew 5:1 – 12

Date: November 1

Theme: Blessed are you

When the Good News bible was released 50 years ago, the translation of the Beatitudes caused some controversy. “Happy are those who know they are spiritually poor.” And the complaints came in; “We may be blessed, but we aren’t happy!” The translators were trying to get away from the idea that these counter-intuitive blessings from Jesus were a job description for the church to proclaim people as saints. They didn’t head this passage as The Beatitudes, they called it “True Happiness”. And maybe these sort of language changes are needed to bring the Gospel to new generations. But the response from traditional readers indicate that they went a bit too far in choosing the word ‘happy’ instead of ‘blessed’. ‘Fortunate’ may have been a better choice, it conveys the jarring, attention grabbing, counter-intuitive nature of Jesus words without adding a layer of emotion. Happy leads to the complaint that we aren’t happy. Blessed and fortunate lead to the more positive question, “How are we blessed? How are we fortunate?”

The essential truth of this list of seemingly negative life situations is that they are all reversed through the presence of God. That is the Gospel! God meets us where we are. God doesn’t wait until we are good enough, strong enough, moral enough or any other sort of enough in order to welcome us. When we are poor in spirit, God comes. When we are grieving, God comes. Even though we are meek, God comes. When we are burdened with worry about the state of the world and the lack of justice, God comes. And in that coming is our blessing because whatever we are going through, we are not going through it alone.

In faith we can know the benefits of the Gospel – in Christ, God has come close to us. The old promises of Isaiah come true in Christ:

*Do not be afraid for I have redeemed you
I have called you by name, you are mine
When you pass through the waters, I will be with you.*

And that is the essential truth about saints. Not that they are strong, confident people able to do anything, but that they are those who have grasped the Gospel and rely on the presence of God in all that they face in life. Not that they are morally upright and have earned their place with God, but that they are the meek and pure in heart who have been met by grace. Not that they hold themselves holy and separated from the world, but that they show mercy and seek peace in response to the merciful and peacemaking Christ they follow.

That is the answer to this counter-intuitive list of behaviours; that is how we are blessed, that is why we are fortunate. God meets us and offers all the benefits of presence – comfort, strength, inspiration, and hope. That is what it means to be a saint and why, even when he was calling them to task or criticising their behaviour, Paul always addressed his letters to ‘the saints’ of which ever church he was writing to. Not just to the leaders, those who might appear on a long list like the

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characters in Hebrews who performed great deeds by faith, but all the members of the church who had passed through the waters of baptism and knew the presence of God in their lives. The poor in spirit, the meek, the peacemakers and those who were going through persecution – all the saints.

And that is why each of us have a list of saints that we know, that have demonstrated the comforting and inspiring presence of God in their lives. Those who go to work, day after day even though they regularly face ridicule and bullying for their faith. Those who face death, illness, or disability with a smile on their face and a prayer on their lips for those who are in need. Those who cannot explain all the theology and doctrines, and probably doubt or don't understand some, but who know their living Saviour and face life with joy. The saints whose living example brought us to faith, or held us in faith, or taught us about the truth of the faith, or made faith come alive before our eyes.

I have often wondered why Christians are so willing to put up displays of the Ten Commandments – in their church and in public – and not displays of the Beatitudes? Is it because it's easier to judge people for being liars than assess if they are meek? Or is it because in this assertive individualistic culture it's embarrassing to be meek, poor in spirit, merciful and pure in heart? Or is it simply that the Beatitudes are not a standard to aspire to or a job description, they are a promise; you are not alone in all the struggles, stresses, disappointments, down times, and challenges. God comes and meets us in whatever we are going through. And in the trusting in that promise is the claim to be saints, that is how we are blessed. And in reading the Beatitudes, let us give thanks to God for all those people in our lives who have, and are, trusting in the presence of God and the love of Christ. Amen.

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