

Bennochy church: 12th March 2017

I want you to imagine that you are in Galilee. You are on a windswept hillside near a little fishing town called Capernaum. You look out. The Sea of Galilee glistens blue below, reflecting a clear midday sky. A small group of disciples circles a young man who appears to be about thirty. He is sitting, as rabbis in this time and culture normally do. You, are part of a huge crowd that extends beyond the inner circle of disciples. You are there because you are more than curious about what he is about to say. There is a sense of excitement and expectation in the air. Is this the day many people have been waiting for. Was he going to say something, to change the world?

Jesus begins in a fascinating way. He uses this term 'blessed' and does so very deliberately. Each phrase, is carefully crafted, to answer just one question, who will be part of the coming Kingdom of God, as ushered in by God's expected and imminent, Messiah.

The beatitudes are all about people's *identity*. For Jesus to say 'Blessed, are these people', is for him to say 'listen: these are the people you should aspire to be like. This is the group you want to belong to.' If you want to be Kingdom people, then your identity must be 'marked' with these values of God. In a sense he was demarcating God's 'in crowd', but the rules had changed!

I have no doubt that his words took people totally by surprise. Shocked even. Their impact is lost on us by familiarity, but their meaning and impact, is just as real. The people of Israel thought they knew all about God's 'in crowd'. By an ancestry going back to Abraham, it was them. But Jesus here changes the rules.

We live in a culture where we almost, without thinking, absorb and take in its values. Where it is easier at the end of the day, just to play by the rules, rather than challenge them. It is not easy to go against the flow. It was no different in Jesus day.

Success measured in wealth and power. A society that struggles with death and loss. We often fail to protect the vulnerable. We say, charity begins at home, and we might think of others, once our own happiness and future is secured. A culture that says, be independent and aggressive, hungry and thirsty for higher status in the social pecking order. That is how you measure your worth and value. Strike back quickly when others strike you, and above all, guard your image, so you'll always be popular.

Jesus here uses a 'God lens' to define success and well-being, which is so profoundly different from what we are told today. Today, the world shouts its values to us in adverts, '*we are what we buy*'. What we can afford defines us. We become part of the 'brand'. Social media gives us our connections, one to one but, not face to face and false news tells us what to believe. If

enough people say it, it must be true. The beatitudes, as the still small voice of God in the world, are the very antithesis of secular values. Today, we might say, who is of value? Who has status? Who has power? Who is popular? God says, who is blessed? His criteria is totally different.

This morning, we have read the *beatitudes* in two different translations. Are we on the list? Is there something of the words of Jesus that is part of our identity. In our relationship with God, who are we and how do we live out our lives?

Jesus said, 'blessed' are:

- The poor and those in solidarity with them.
- Those who mourn, who feel grief and loss.
- The non-violent and the gentle.
- Those who hunger and thirst for the common good and aren't satisfied with the status quo.
- The merciful and compassionate.
- Those characterised by openness, sincerity and pure motives.
- Those who work for peace and reconciliation.
- Those who keep seeking justice even when they're misunderstood and misjudged.
- Those who stand for justice as the prophets did, who refuse to quieten down, when they are slandered, mocked, resented, threatened and harmed.

Think about this. How long has Jesus been speaking for? A mere matter of seconds, and he already turned, how we understand status and how we climb our social pyramids, upside down. he is saying, these are the ethics of the Kingdom of God.

I wonder, if something else is happening here. Maybe echoes from of an ancient story reverberating around the hillside. In surveying the scene before them and hearing his words, are people being reminded of something else, deeply engrained in their history? If this is new law for us to live by, has God not done this before? Did God not deliver his greatest commands from another mountain, and in Jesus, is there not something of a new Moses? God has been here before, speaking to his people, but this time, it's different. The Kingdom of God is at hand. Not for one nation alone, but for all. And in living out these Kingdom values, we make the kingdom real. "*Your Kingdom come on earth, as it is in heaven*".

It is these 'be- attitudes' that give salt its flavour and light its brightness. They shout a new culture and a new way of living. They seek to turn the world upside down, makes a difference for God.

May we be blessed by God, and seek first his Kingdom. Amen.