

The Beatitudes, Matthew 5:1-12

I wonder if you've ever had a sense you were standing on holy ground? A place like Moses when he saw the burning bush, or the Israelites when the priests first offered sacrifices and the glory of God fell. Well, for me, this feels like standing on holy ground, because here in this passage – now called the Beatitudes, the beginning of The Sermon on the Mount, itself the most extraordinary sermon ever given – HERE we encounter something so strange, so extraordinary, that I feel this sense of awe, this sense of being on holy ground. If any of you have ever doubted that Jesus is the Son of God, then I would recommend taking a good look at this passage today, because only God could ever have come up with something so crazy and yet so utterly profound. And I hope this passage provokes you in some way today – perhaps to stunned silence, perhaps to revulsion, perhaps to tears, perhaps to a joyful 'YEESSSS' – but not to indifference. Here is the heart of the upside-down kingdom: radical, revolutionary, the mustard seed, the pearl in the field, the rock of Daniel's vision cut without hands, which lays worldly kingdoms low. This is the world as Jesus sees it.

As most of you know, we've spent the last few weeks re-telling the story of Israel, with Jesus as the 'new Israel'. Jesus has fled to Egypt, returned, judged the oppressors, gone through water, survived the desert and taken the land. One thing is left: giving the law. But God is never going to repeal the original law, as Jesus himself says, not one 'jot or tittle' will disappear from it. Rather, he explains the original law given on Mt Sinai, getting to the heart of the original meaning. Over the next few weeks, we'll look at this extraordinary teaching in detail: but we start with perhaps the most famous bit of all: the Beatitudes.

In response to the large crowds that were now following him (4:25), Jesus goes up a mountain (v1), but I wonder if you spotted that this sermon was not primarily addressed to the crowds but to the disciples (v1b-2). You get this sense that the crowds were able to overhear what Jesus was saying, but his primary listeners were the *disciples*, those who had already surrendered their futures, their livelihoods, their reputations to follow the rabbi carpenter from Galilee. So he finishes this first section in v11 'Blessed are YOU' and he means this literally, because the disciples were going to get all that treatment, all that persecution, and fairly rapidly.

But what on earth does all the rest of it mean? Why are these groups of people blessed? What does it tell us about the *kingdom* of which Jesus is the king? It's kind of an extraordinary group of people to be blessed isn't it? The poor in spirit, meek, the mourners. Are these the people who would succeed in the real world? You start to get an idea of just how radical, how extraordinary this teaching is when you think of the opposite set of attributes. I tried to define the opposite of each and came up with this – blessed are the self-sufficient, the assertive, the moral pragmatists, the fiercely competitive, the back-coverers. I think these are the people who succeed in life, don't you?

Which begs the million dollar question: precisely what sort of kingdom is Jesus building here? Who's it for? Someone once said that we spend most of time trying to make church, or following Jesus, as attractive as possible, whereas Jesus spent most of his time doing the opposite. There's always been a strand of Christianity which was 'out there', which was radical, which was for the freaks, the fanatics, and the misfits. But the disturbing thing about this passage is that Jesus is suggesting that this is not unorthodox, non-conformist Christian faith, but basically the *norm*.

This is the discipleship of the desert fathers, people like St Anthony who heard Jesus' words to sell everything and give to the poor and did precisely that, and went into the desert and lived in a cave in solitude for 20 years, and then birthed a movement which led to the evangelisation of Western Europe. Or the Moravian church, who basically prayed non-stop for a hundred years and eventually saw people like Wesley come to faith. Or the early missionaries, who packed their clothes in a coffin when they got on the boat leaving the UK because they knew their life expectancy was 6 months but, you know what, they went anyway. These are the fasters, the intercessors, the morbidly intense, the people who take it all just a bit *too* seriously. And Jesus calls them blessed. *Makarios* – you're lucky, he says, you're lucky if you mourn, if you're poor or persecuted, if you're pure or a peacemaker, if you're meek, merciful or mourning – for my kingdom is for you.

For the rest of this talk, I've tried to get to the heart of each of these sayings. Have a listen and see if you can relate to any of these – and if you do, give thanks. Jesus calls you blessed:

Blessed are the poor in Spirit, the ones who haven't got it all together and who know they need something, they need God to fill the God shaped hole; who aren't afraid to be seen as weak because they understand their own frailty; the people who pray in the supermarket queue, in the streets, at their desks and sat on their sofa, who ask for God's Spirit every day and for every thing, big or small, because they know they desperately need him...

... for yours is the kingdom of heaven, and all that you seek of God, He will give to you.

Blessed are the mourners, who see life through tear-stained faces, who haven't got compassion fatigue yet, who carry the world's problems around on their shoulders, and their friends problems too, the ones that society thinks are too heavy, too intense, if only they would lighten up a bit...

... for you will be comforted, God himself will wipe every tear from your eyes.

Blessed are the meek, the doormats, the ones who always let someone else go first, who don't push into queues, who surrender their rights for the benefit of others; actually the secure ones, the emotionally healthy who don't need to be first, to shout loudest or push their way into people's faces, the ones whose strength is under control...

... for you will inherit the earth, when the first are last and the last are first.

Blessed are those who hunger and thirst for righteousness, the ones desperate for more of God, who'll do anything, go anywhere if only they would experience more of God's love, more of his truth, more of his transforming power in their lives, more of his blessing, more intimacy, more of his life poured into others, more of the kingdom at work...

... for you will be filled, just as you desire: Christ in you, the hope of glory.

Blessed are the merciful, the ones who don't exact their pound of flesh, who choose to remember that offenders are also victims, who choose release over resentment, who know that the one thing that's worse than forgiveness is unforgiveness, who love to see others go free, who understand that they are ragamuffins anyway...

... for you will be shown mercy from the God who is mercy, who sent Jesus because his desire to be merciful to you was so strong.

Blessed are the pure in heart, the ones who always try and see the best in people, who'd rather get their fingers burnt than never open their hands near a fire, who know what human nature is like but still long for a better way, the ones with tender consciences, who exhaust themselves in the search for integrity, who hate gossip and get distressed by others' slander, who feel sick at casual blasphemy and love the church despite all its faults, who know the kingdom is ultimately filled with flawed saints trying to clean up their act...

... for you will see God, the consuming fire, and dwell in the light & the warmth of His glory.

Blessed are the peacemakers, the middle-way people, the people of consensus and negotiated compromise, the pacifists and tree-huggers, the ones who hate aggression and domination, who suffer themselves when they see violence inflicted on others...

... for you will be called children of God, the Prince of Peace.

Blessed are the persecuted, the ones who stand up for what they believe, the hardliners and fanatics, the prophets in the wilderness, the lone voices, the ones who are always open about what they believe even if it costs them friends, promotions or even their job, whose love of peace is never at the expense of their principles, the cross-carriers and self-deniers, those who will suffer anything for their faith and for the glory of God...

... for yours is the kingdom of heaven, the crazy, upside down kingdom.

Or to put it another way... ***Blessed are the losers in this world
For they are the winners in the kingdom of God***

Two simple questions as I close: The first is this: what sort of kingdom did you sign up for?
Or rather, what sort of king did you sign up for?

And the second is this: what sort of brothers and sisters are you prepared to associate with?