

## Beatitudes intro – Matthew 5:1-10

Beginning of major new series – today and over next 3-4 weeks we'll be looking at probably the most famous sermon intro of them all – what have come to be known as the Beatitudes.

Word Beatitude from Latin 'Beatus' meaning Blessed – Jesus describes 8 groups of people who are blessed. Why so much time on 10 verses? Our diocesan bishop, Bishop Steven, has asked all churches in Diocese to spend time reflecting on them. He has developed a new vision for us to be churches which are Contemplative, Compassionate and Courageous. And his inspiration is from these verses, which get to the heart of what it means to be people who are like that – contemplative people who are poor in spirit, meek and pure in heart. Compassionate people who mourn i.e. who can feel the pain of others, and are merciful. And courageous people who hunger and thirst for justice, who are peacemakers, who are even willing to risk persecution for righteousness' sake.

So we're giving this month to do just that. These verses may be very familiar to most of you – but I hope you'll find fresh treasure in them as we soak ourselves in their wisdom. Alongside Sundays we'll have some midweek groups which give us the chance to reflect more – only 3 weeks and commend them to you (chance to share in forming vision)

Begin my admitting that whenever we look at these verses we have a sense that we stand on holy ground. I have this urge to take off my shoes like Moses because here we encounter something so strange, so extraordinary, that I feel this sense of awe, because only God could ever have come up with something so crazy and yet so utterly profound. Here is the heart of God's upside-down kingdom: radical, revolutionary, the mustard seed, the pearl in the field. In short, this is the world as Jesus sees it.

Not time to do more than scratch the surface this morning, but I'm going to share a quote which gets to the heart of the challenge, by Dallas Willard: 'The Beatitudes are among the literary and religious treasures of the human race. Along with the Ten Commandments, the 23<sup>rd</sup> Psalm, the Lord's Prayer and a very few other passages from the bible, they are acknowledged by almost everyone to be among the highest expressions of religious insight and moral inspiration. We can savour them, affirm them, meditate on them and engrave them on plaques to hang on our walls. But a major question remains: how are we to *live* in response to them?'

The challenge becomes obvious if you think about the opposite of each beatitude: blessed are – the self-sufficient, those who have no problems, the assertive, those who are quite alright as they are, those who know their rights and make sure they get them, the cynical, the competitive, those who keep their heads down. If you were interpreting our culture, that's quite a good description of how to succeed in life. **So what is Jesus really getting at when he commends these groups of people?** Two simple observations today:

They remind us that the kingdom of **God's love is available to everyone on equal terms now**. They describe the people around him, what Willard calls 'the raw mass of humanity' – 'he saw the crowds' (v1). Think about who came to be touched and blessed by Jesus – not the respectable, but those who needed him, people with real problems: the socially rejected, the physically infirm, the morally dubious. What Jesus has to share is good news – 'you might be seen as losers, you might even see yourselves as losers, but I have good news: you who mourn, you who are poor in spirit, you merciful and peacemakers, the sort of people who get trodden on by everyone else – yes all of you – my kingdom of love is available to *you*.'

And though he begins by addressing his disciples, it's the crowds at the end of the sermon (end of ch7) who stand amazed. As perhaps do we again today. Who does Jesus bless? Not always who we think – which is good news for any of us who recognise our own spiritual poverty. If that realisation causes us to cast ourselves fully on God's grace, then Jesus can say to us too: 'yours is the kingdom of heaven.'

Secondly, they remind us that **God's values are not ours**. Jesus' way of looking at the world turns it all upside down. He sees real life as it is and redeems those qualities we often see as weak. Those who are still able to feel compassion at others' pain, those who don't tire of being merciful, those who are hungry for more of God. These are the people Jesus blesses. And as he blesses them, he causes us to realise that we need more of these kinds of qualities for ourselves.

The truth is that we can only come to Jesus for them – as we have observed, they are not qualities the world tends to value. They are God-things, and we need the Spirit of God, the Spirit of Jesus, to truly cultivate them.

*So as we commit ourselves to reflect again on these extraordinary verses, a question for us to consider over the next few weeks – how can we manifest these qualities more as a church and as individuals, that we too might be blessed by Jesus?*

And perhaps for us to ponder today – which one of these qualities might God be calling us to grow in?

Amen.

