

LEYLAND UNITED REFORMED CHURCH
SERMON: Sunday 29th January 2017

Reading Matthew 5.1-12 – The Beatitudes

Video Clip: Monty Python - Sermon on the Mountain

Address

In the clip from the 'Life of Brian' we have a joke based on miss-hearing and satirising how people rationalise what they hear. So 'blessed are the peacemakers' becomes 'cheese-makers' and as that is too specific it becomes 'blessed are the makers of any dairy products.'

Miss-hearing and rationalising are mistakes we all often make. Sometimes we hear what we want to hear. Whatever is actually said, we amplify certain parts that fit with what we already believe. At times, we can cut out one, or a few words, that simply describe a subject and our minds rush off with all of our pre-conceived notions and we miss what is actually said. Sometimes a phrase, a word, someone's tone of voice echoes something from our past and we react to that historic experience, rather than to the person before us. Then there is always the politicians' response, and despite whatever is actually said we just say the thing we wanted to say in reply.

Then we have our habit of rationalising. We do something, we say something, and when someone queries why, we get defensive. We get embarrassed that we may have acted selfishly, without thinking, or because of heartfelt conviction and we try to excuse our self-centred, thoughtless, or righteous action. Or maybe like the character in the film we have a reputation to maintain so we compound an error by expanding its meaning so it becomes even more nonsensical.

Communicating with each other is a wonderful gift. We can share stories, deepen relationships, explain things; but we can also bewilder, anger and confuse each other. Words are all we have, whether spoken or written, but to really understand their meaning we really need to listen, reflect and at times dig a little deeper.

So, what did you hear when the Beatitudes were read earlier?

Did you hear a whole lot of meaningless platitudes?

Reassurance to those that suffer now that heaven will be a glorious reward?

Or

Let us go back to the beginning of our reading:

"When Jesus saw the crowds, he went up the mountain; and after he sat down, his disciples came to him. ² Then he began to speak, and taught them, saying:"

These opening words set out what it is we are about to hear. We have a crowd of people, Jesus goes up a mountain, sits down, his disciples gather around him, and he speaks and teaches them. The crowds are in the background, part of the scenery. Jesus is mainly teaching his disciples, not them. He's also gone up a mountain, not the best place to deliver a lecture, but it is symbolic. Moses went up a mountain and received the Ten Commandments, so Matthew has Jesus doing the same as he begins three chapters full of Jesus' teaching. Jesus also sits, which is how rabbi's traditionally taught, and would also make speaking to a crowd on a mountain side even harder.

Whatever you make of that background, the crucial detail is that the Beatitudes are an act of teaching. We are supposed to learn something from them. They are not something nice to hear, or

eternal reassurance, they are a lesson. They are not about future reward, they are about the here and now, and a challenge to emulate them.

To illustrate this let me quote how John Dominic Crossan translates some of the Beatitudes in his book 'The Essential Jesus':

Only the destitute are innocent.
Only those who have no bread have no fault.
Only the wretched are guiltless.
Only the despised are blameless.

It is true, it is a valuable lesson, that those who have the least, who are in the most desperate of circumstances, who are taking risks for all the right reasons; they are the ones who are closest to God. They are truly blessed.

So, in this light let me offer a retelling of the Beatitudes:

When God feels furthest away, is when intimacy with God can come instantly.

When your heart is broken into a million pieces, is when others are most likely to embrace us and we are the least likely to refuse.

When we are most aware of who we truly are, is when we are fully aware of the beauty and wonder of the world around us.

When we give all that we are to do the right thing, is when our achievements give the greatest affirmation.

When we see the pain in the eyes of a person who has wronged us, is when we feel fully human.

When we have received forgiveness, escaped distraction, know ourselves and place ourselves before the ground of our being, is when we are closest to God.

When we seek to calm troubled waters, help others to communicate, refuse to respond in kind, is when we are acting most like God's children.

When we are living God's kingdom and the world seeks to compromise, confront, or confound us, is when we are being the most Christ-like.

In all things, rejoice and be glad, for God is within, around, and beyond all that is.

The Beatitudes are a call to be blessings to others. They are an invitation to see the world as it is, but to live as if God's Kingdom exists in the here and now.

They are a challenge to come alongside others on their journeys, be responsible for your own, and be open to see the glory of God within it all.

In all things, rejoice and be glad, for God is within, around, and beyond all that is. **Amen**