

Draw near to God

Today's passage from Matthew's gospel is one that I've always thought was very strange! The Greek word for blessed – *Makarios* – translates as happy, in the sense of deep contentment, but also meaning being favoured by God. So Jesus is saying that '*happy* are those who are poor in spirit', or simply *poor* in Luke's account of the same event; '*happy* are those who have been bereaved'; '*happy* are those who are meek', '*happy* are those who are persecuted for their faith' and so on, and I think '*this is so unreal*'. This is not the way the world is. The poor have no wealth to spend, no property to sell, nothing set aside for a rainy day. They search down the sides of sofas for pennies for bus fares, have no slippers or dressing gown if they are taken into hospital, no money to buy birthday or Christmas presents unless they go into debt. And, in today's cost-of-living crisis, many are having to make the difficult choice between feeding their families and warming their homes. Where's the happiness in this? Yet Jesus says they are blessed and that the kingdom of heaven is theirs.

And happy are those who have been bereaved? Tell that to the families of the 50,000 who lost their lives in the recent earthquakes in Turkey and Syria. Or the families of the

100,000 military and 30,000 civilians who have died in Ukraine since the conflict began just a year ago.

And happy are those whose commitment to God provokes persecution? *Really?* Blessed and happy are those living in North Korea, the most dangerous place on earth to be a Christian? Well, maybe in the next life, you might think, but of what use in this life is '*pie in the sky when we die*' thinking?

So what on earth is Jesus going on about? Is it really all complete nonsense?

To understand what Jesus *is* saying, we need to consider the context – what society was like at the time, who he was talking to, who would have been listening and what his words meant to those first listeners.

We know that news of the presence and power of Jesus had spread like wildfire, far beyond the confines of the lakeside towns and villages. Wherever he turned up, people brought to him all who were ill with various diseases, the demon-possessed, those who were paralysed, and he healed them. So, the day recounted in our bible passage, appears to be a day like many others. He was being followed by a crowd but, instead of tending to their needs, he climbs a mountain, gathers his disciples around him and begins to teach them. You don't know how many in the crowd could also hear,

maybe just those nearby, or maybe the crowd quietened sufficiently for Jesus' words, from the vantage point of being higher up, to be heard by many.

In Jesus' teaching that follows – commonly called the Beatitudes – he turns the social order of the day upside down. If we find his words a bit of a muddle, a bit upside down, then so did those on the mountainside that day. In the ancient world, those who were labelled '*blessed*' were those who were rich, who owned land, had honour and power and often good health, whose standard of living put them out of reach of the cares of this life. In contrast, poor people were weak in every sense of the word.

By proclaiming that the poor are 'blessed', Jesus is saying that the poor are now honourable. He turns the honour and shame codes upside down by stating that the kingdom of God belongs to these poor, to these beggars and destitute people. This theme is continued in the remaining Beatitudes, or blessings, when Jesus congratulates those who are hungry and those who mourn or weep. He assures the hungry that they will be filled and the sad that they will laugh. And you can see why they would have been attracted to his words. Everything that had previously been said about the rich, the well-to-do, was now being applied to them.

At the same time, those who had power and wealth would have been profoundly disturbed by such teachings. *Who* is Jesus to declare that God's kingdom belongs to poor, sick people? In a culture of limited goods, this teaching would have been seriously threatening to the rich for, if the hungry are to be fed, then the full might not get as much as they were used to getting. So, on the mountainside that day, one group likes what he has to say, as they have much to gain, but the other finds it disturbing, as they have much to lose.

So this is no ordinary sermon. Each Beatitude challenges us to see and experience things differently. It is argued that the first beatitude – '*blessed are the poor in spirit, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven*' – forms the basis on which the others rest. The poor in spirit is sometimes helpfully paraphrased as '*those who know their need of God*'. No-one is arguing that being poor, having very little, is in itself a blessing, but it's often when we've run out of our own resources, that we become aware of our dependence on God. And it's then that we can see the world and people in a very different light.

A few days ago, I was reading the story of Etty Hillesum, a young Jewish woman who was killed at Auschwitz in 1943. She wasn't a Christian but was highly spiritual in the best sense of that term. She was an utter realist, devoid of self-

pity, and with an almost impossible freedom from need to blame, hate, or project her inner anxiety elsewhere.

As the Nazis began their campaign of genocide and Etty's future became more and more uncertain, she addressed God repeatedly in her diaries, regarding him not as an external saviour but, in her words, as a *'power she could nurture and feed inside of her'*. She honoured and loved this very power in his seeming powerlessness. She writes:

'Alas, there doesn't seem to be much you yourself can do about our circumstances, about our lives. Neither do I hold you responsible. You cannot help us, but we must help you and defend your dwelling place inside us to the last.'

And again, in a letter to a friend written from a transit camp not long before she was sent to Auschwitz, she writes, from a foundational place of faith, hope and love, these words:

'In spite of everything you always end up with the same conviction: life is good after all. It's not God's fault that things go awry sometimes. And that's what stays with me, even now, even when I'm about to be packed off to Poland with my whole family.'

And she's right. For the people on the mountainside that day listening to Jesus, few of the problems they were facing – the occupation by the Romans, the poverty caused by

impossible taxes, disability and sickness – were going to go away when they climbed down the mountainside later that day and returned to their homes. So what was different?

What was different was the notion that God was doing a new thing. They'd never heard anyone speak like Jesus was speaking. His words expressed a whole new way of being God's people. A whole new way of being human.

And what it promised to the people listening to Jesus that day, what it promised to Etty Hillesum in a concentration camp, what it promises to anyone feeling at the end of their resources due to whatever life has thrown at them is this – that God has this in hand, and there is nothing, absolutely nothing, that can separate us from his love. And from his love comes strength. Strength to endure almost anything.

The people of Ukraine know this well. Many politicians and experts had predicted that Ukraine would fall within three days of the invasion. They now agree that a miracle happened when numerically and technically superior forces had been held back. The All-Ukrainian Council of Churches said: 'We believe this is an example of how God intervened in response to the powerful prayer for Ukraine that rose up world-wide. The Lord sowed chaos among the enemies and took their minds away, while giving our soldiers

supernatural strength and accuracy to repel the attack.' And it continues to do so today.

For Christians, Lent is typically a time of solemnity and self-reflection where we pull away from the distractions and desires of daily living and intentionally draw close to God. Repeating the words of ETTY HILLESUM, it's a time where we *'defend God's dwelling place within us and seek to know more of the power that promises to nurture and feed us'*.

Yes, life can be tough. But in seeking to draw close to God, we feel his presence within us, caring for us and strengthening us. Jesus' words on a mountainside gave hope to a people who thought God had forgotten about them. And they similarly give hope today. God's kingdom is for all.

I conclude with the prayer for the week from the Lent booklet:

Lord Jesus, you spent forty days in the wilderness:
walk with us in the wilderness of Lent and life.
Hold our failures, and the things that go awry,
in the light of your compassion
and guide us each day in your way. Amen.