

TFTD 23.5 Monday Feb 27th

Matthew 5.1-16 How to be happy: the Sermon on the Mount



This week's readings come from Matthew chs 5-7, three chapters of Jesus' teaching which is often called the Sermon on the Mount. The pictures were taken at the church which is built to commemorate the traditional site of Jesus' preaching.

One of the most noticeable features of Matthew's Gospel is the way he concentrates Jesus' teaching into five great blocks of teaching material. (The others are in chapters 10, 13, 18, and 24-25.) All the gospels tell us that Jesus was a compelling teacher, who taught "with authority" (7.28-9). All the Gospels tell us that Jesus

taught in synagogues, on the road, in the Temple, over a meal with his disciples and friends. He taught the crowds, and he taught his disciples in private. Like any good teacher, he would have repeated his teaching on more than one occasion.

But only Matthew gathers all this teaching together to show us Jesus teaching. So Matthew is acting quite deliberately when he places this big block of teaching that we call the “Sermon on the Mount” right at the beginning of his Gospel — before the healing stories, before the controversies. It stands as the entrance portal, the showcase summary of what Jesus taught over many years. It gives us a glimpse into what Jesus meant when he proclaimed, “Repent, for the kingdom of heaven is near” (4.17).

Who was this teaching for? Matthew says “his disciples” in 5.1; but at this point in the story, Jesus has only chosen four of his special disciples (4.18-22). At the end of the “Sermon” it is the crowds who are astonished at his teaching (7.28). This makes more sense — the disciples in 5.1 simply means everyone who had followed him from all across the region (4.25). In other words, in this Sermon Jesus is setting out his stall, showcasing his manifesto for the Kingdom that is drawing near to all Israel. And a pretty challenging manifesto it is, as we shall see!



Jesus said, Blessed are the poor in spirit, for the kingdom of heaven belongs to them. Blessed are those who mourn, for they will be comforted. Matthew 5.3-4

“Life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness” are inalienable human rights, says the US Declaration of Independence. But what is happiness, and how do you pursue it? For the psalmists of ancient Israel, happiness consists in following God’s law: “How happy,” says Psalm 119.1, “is the one whose way is blameless, who walks in the law of the Lord.” Jesus starts somewhere more passionate, and also more earthed.

The first word of this great hymn to God’s law is sometimes translated “blessed”, sometimes “happy”. It’s the same Hebrew word that begins the very first Psalm, and it expresses a sense of blessing and delight that comes from God. And the first section of Jesus’ “Sermon on the Mount” expresses the same idea with

the Greek word makarios, “blessed”. It’s an expression, as William Barclay puts it, not of pious hopes or of nebulous prophecies, but of congratulations on what is.

What’s strange is who Jesus describes as “blessed”. Not the people who succeed in keeping God’s law, but the poor in spirit, the people who know their need of God. Not the cheerful and self-confident, but those who mourn, those who have felt the pain of loss. Not the successful but the meek, those who keep close to the earth and know their place in the created order. Not the rulers of the earth but those who hunger and thirst for righteousness — those consumed with a passionate longing to see God’s justice prevail, a longing that only God can fill. Those who are most like God: the merciful, the pure in heart, the peacemakers.

None of this sounds much like our idea of “happiness” — but these are the people the Sermon reaches out to, these are the people I’m interested in, says Jesus.

These are the people who will see God, the people the kingdom of heaven belongs to. These are the people who light up the world, who are the salt of the earth (vv.13-16). But how do we get to be like that?

Now read on!

God bless, Loveday

Lord, we thy presence seek;  
May ours this blessing be:  
Give us a pure and lowly heart

A temple meet for thee.

Almighty God, whose Son Jesus Christ fasted forty days in the wilderness, and was tempted as we are, yet without sin: give us grace to discipline ourselves in obedience to your Spirit; and, as you know our weakness, so may we know your power to save; through Jesus Christ your Son our Lord. AMEN  
[Collect for the First Sunday in Lent, © The Archbishops' Council 2006]