

alert us to the fact that there may well be a real cost in following our vocation, but the problems and trials should not come as a surprise, or knock us off course.

- ◆ To follow the Beatitudes means resisting the pressure to confirm, and be willing to stand out from the crowd, even if this means being thought odd or subversive. It means risking our popularity, to speak up and stand up for what is true and right. It means being prepared to go against the flow.

READING: ISAIAH 53:3-9

- ◆ This is part of the Old Testament reading for Good Friday. How does this description of the “Suffering Servant” anticipate Jesus’ suffering on the cross. What does it mean for us to take up our cross, and follow him?

THE PROMISE OF BLESSING

- ◆ *For theirs is the kingdom of heaven.* This repeats the blessing of the first Beatitude. Yet, having now embraced all that lies between, there is a sense of the meaning shifting and deepening. The essence of Christianity is union with Christ, and that union will involve union with his suffering and union in his glory: the fullness of his life and joy.

FINAL REFLECTIONS

- ◆ Reflect prayerfully on one thing you have learned, grasped or “re-grasped” during the course.
- ◆ Which Beatitude has most changed you and affected you during the course?

THE BENEFICE OF TETBURY, BEVERSTON, LONG NEWNTON & SHIPTON MOYNE

Lent 2020: COURSE BOOKLET

Life Attitudes: Exploring the Beatitudes

In Lent, we are invited to pause and explore how our lives can be shaped more truly by our faith in Jesus Christ. We reflect Jesus’ own life and teachings, and how we are called to live as followers of Christ.

This Lent we focus on The Beatitudes: eight sayings of Christ in Matthew’s Gospel (Chapter 5, verses 3-12), regarded as the very essence of the Christian way of life. The course encourages us to examine our lives in the light of Jesus’ radical teaching.

This booklet is designed to be used either on its own, or while attending one of our Lent Home Groups. The material is drawn primarily from “The Plain Main looks at The Beatitudes” by William Barclay; also from “Life Attitudes” by Robert Warren and Sue Mayfield.

WEEK 1: THE PROMISE OF BLISS

Introducing the Beatitudes, we explore why these eight sayings have such a central place in our faith. Then, reflecting on the first saying, we ask how poverty might be a blessing and not a curse? We think about Jesus’ call to reflect anew on what wealth is, recognising that without *God* we have nothing, and putting our whole trust in him. And, in this, we find heaven on earth.

INTRODUCTION NOTES

- ◆ The Beatitudes are seen as the very essence of the Christian way of life. In Matthew’s Gospel (Matthew 5:3-12), these eight sayings come at the very start of the Sermon on the Mount.
- ◆ Matthew starts by setting the scene – and the way he does that is important. “*When Jesus saw the crowds, he went up the mountain, and after he sat down, his disciples came to him. Then he began to speak and*

taught them saying ...” Surrounded by his disciples, Jesus sits down, which is the posture of official teaching. This is no pleasant discourse given in passing. Jesus telling his disciples the very essence of what he has come to say: the whole truth is told and the whole heart opened.

- ◆ We translate the Beatitudes as statements, for example: “Blessed are the poor in spirit” however, in the original Greek there is no verb “are”. So, a better translation is as an exclamation, for example: O the bliss of the poor in spirit ...” And then we are told of the bliss, the blessing, which is promised to us here and now, not some future happiness.
- ◆ It is also misleading to translate the Beatitudes as “happiness”, as in the Good News translation: “Happy are those who know they are spiritually poor”. However the root of the word is “hap”, meaning chance – so happiness depends on circumstances. Bliss – to be blessed – is independent of outward circumstances and, as William Barclay says, “has within itself all it needs for perfect happiness.” And this is made possible when, through Jesus Christ, we come to share in the very life of God.

Q, Have you ever experienced bliss? Can you describe it?

READING: MATTHEW 5:1-12

Take a few moments to reflect to ask: what strikes me most, what puzzles me most, what gives me hope, and what do they leave me wanting to discover or do?

Taken as a whole, the Beatitudes tell us of the bliss of recognising our deepest need, and discovering that all our needs are met in God. It means (1) discovering our own poverty and being sorrowfully aware of our brokenness; (2) accepting the goodness and gift of God’s love; and in turn (3) hungering and thirsting for the righteousness – the right ways of living – made possible by God’s grace.

of bitterness and the unforgiving spirit; the cycle of being hurt and abused, and then hurting and abusing in turn. This Beatitude speaks of the blessing on those who produce and maintain and restore right relationships in our families, our communities and between nations. Finally, it meant to draw others into right relationship with God in Jesus Christ, striving and praying that instead of fleeing from God people will seek him, and find themselves at home in his loving gaze and care.

THE PROMISE OF BLESSING

- ◆ *For they shall be called children of God.* This promise underlines that peace-making is central to the nature of God. So central that, as peace-makers ourselves, we are known as his children, and bearing God’s own mark – God’s very identity - in our lives.

WEEK 5: LIVING OUR FAITH

As we finish, we reflect on how Jesus’ teachings lead us into lives that are radically different and counter-cultural. We reflect on the costs of being willing to stand out from the crowd even if it means being thought odd and subversive. And, in all of this, finding the wonder of Christ’s blessings.

Blessed are those who are persecuted because of righteousness, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven.

NOTES

- ◆ The persecution of the early Church is well-documented. And, in fact, at the end of the first century the Greek word for *witness* – which was *martus* – had also become the word for *martyr*. So, within a hundred years, to witness to Jesus Christ is inextricably linked with suffering for Christ.
- ◆ And Jesus was clear about this. He speaks with “almost startling honesty” about what his followers might expect. The goal here is not persecution, but holding on to the will of God. The Beatitudes

- ◆ Someone can be a peaceful person and a peace-lover, and yet is not a peace-maker. We can know that something is wrong, in our family, church, at work. We can know that something needs to be done to put the situation right. We can also know that to take steps will involve difficulty and trouble and problems which will be unpleasant to face. So, we may decide to do and say nothing “for peace’s sake”. That makes us peace-lovers, but not peace-makers. Because the longer the trouble drifts on, the more serious the consequences, and the harder its cure.
- ◆ The person who is blessed is the one prepared to face difficulty, unpleasantness, unpopularity, trouble in order to *make* peace. The peace this Beatitude speaks of does not come from evading the issue. It is the peace that comes from facing the issue, and from being prepared to give everything in toil and in sacrifice which the situation demands.

We often think about peace as the absence of conflict, or trouble, or war, or noise and bustle. But the Hebrew word – *shalom* – has two meanings ...

- 1) Complete and positive wellbeing. So to “make peace” means to work for the well-being and welfare of the world. God cares about how people live, how they work, how they are fed and clothed, and how they are treated in weakness, in want, in age and in pain. When we are passionate about the welfare of others, we are serving God.
- (2) Perfection in human relationships, describing intimacy, fellowship and uninterrupted goodwill. So our call is to work for right relationships in every sphere of life, and breaking down the barriers that divide us, one from another and from God. It means being at peace with ourselves: knowing our human capacity for good and evil, for loving kindness and hurt, for generosity and selfishness, and resolving those tensions in Christ. It means working for reconciliation and to restore broken relationships, building up loving regard between all people. Our relationships on every level are marred by deep division: suspicion of the stranger, creating the divisions of “us” and “them”; the harbouring

Blessed are the poor in spirit, for theirs in the kingdom of heaven.

NOTES

- ◆ The Greek word used for “poor” doesn’t just mean living simply, without any unnecessary frills. It means to be destitute – to have nothing: reduced to begging, with no resources or status to defend yourself, open to insults and being pushed aside in the competitive society of this world.
- ◆ William Barclay describes three steps in receiving this blessing. (1) To realise – recognise - our utter helplessness and inadequacy, and acknowledging our needs. Like someone who is ill, the first step to restoring health is to recognise that we are sick, and getting help. (2) Learning to put our trust in God. (3) Accepting God’s will, rather than playing God in our lives. This means putting our whole self and life in God’s hands and being wholly committed to God.

THE PROMISE OF BLESSING

- ◆ *For they will inherit the earth.* Here is the understanding that – as people who do God’s will – we are bringing in God’s kingdom on earth. By God’s grace, we are creating a little piece of heaven on earth.

WEEK 2: THE BLESSING OF MOURNING AND MEEKNESS

This week we hear the promise of blessing in sorrow when, turning broken-hearted to God, we find consolation and the full welcome of the love of God. And we explore the true meaning of meekness, so often despised in our culture yet, in truth, the call to know our strength and power, and exercise them with kindness and empathy.

Blessed are those who mourn, for they will be comforted.

NOTES

- ◆ The Greek word (*penthein*) signifies the deepest grief: weeping, and the sorrow of mourning the dead. It is sorrow that pierces the heart. No gentle, sentimental, twilight sadness, it is poignant, piercing and intense. A sorrow which is visible, in your bearing, your face, your tears.
- ◆ We acknowledge our own sorrow and loss; the difficult choices we make which may involve suffering; and the call to compassion (suffering with others). YET the “real meaning” of this Beatitudes is: we are blessed when we are moved to bitter sorrow at the realisation of our own sin. Here, Jesus asks us to face pain and injustice in the world, and own the fact that we are part of the problem. This is sorrow that comes gently. It is not about destructive guilt or beating ourselves up. It is discovering that the way to God is the way of the broken heart.

READING: MARK 14:32-42

Q. What distressed Jesus in this situation? How does this shed light on this Beatitude?

THE PROMISE OF BLESSING

- ◆ *For they will be comforted.* Greek word (*parakalein*) means to comfort or console. Although there are all kinds of limitations on human forgiveness, when we go to God in sorrow for our sin, we receive “the full welcome of the love of God”. A welcome where our sorrow is abundantly comforted. This is not simply the comfort of past sins forgiven and forgotten. We are treated not as a repentant criminal but as an honoured guest. We are invited to become God’s ally, his helper, and his witness in the world.

- ◆ So, this is the blessing of the heart whose thoughts, motives, desires are completely unmixed, genuine and sincere. This is a life marked by honest and strict self-examination; the person who faces up to all their tendencies to self-satisfaction, self-display and pride, to pleasing ourselves or seeking the approval of others.

READING: Matthew 4:1-11 (The Temptations of Jesus)

- ◆ Here we see Jesus’ needs, motives and desires are all on trial. In what ways is he “pure of heart”? Taking each of the trials in turn, how do we respond to those temptations? What are the other temptations we face?

THE PROMISE OF BLESSING

- ◆ *For they will see God.* This doesn’t mean literally, with the physical eye. But the promise is of an ever-deepening relationship with God. In being pure in heart, instead of the distortion of manipulative behaviour and impure motives, we embrace an honest, trusting attitude to others, and to God. This is to grow into the fulness of the knowledge of God and to enter into an intimate fellowship of love.

Blessed are the peacemakers, for they will be called children of God.

NOTES

- ◆ The New Testament is the book of peace. The Greek word – *eirene* – appears 88 times, and in every book. When Jesus was leaving his disciples, as John tells the story, he says to them: “Peace I leave with you, my peace I give to you” (John 14:27). This is described as the last will and testament of Jesus: Jesus had no worldly goods to leave, but he left his peace to all people.
- ◆ William Barclay invites us to notice that this promise is made not to *peace-lovers* but to *peace-makers*.

READING: LUKE 10:25-37 (The Good Samaritan)

Q. How does this parable apply in my life? What needs to change for me to be a Good Samaritan?

THE PROMISE OF BLESSING

- ◆ *For they will receive mercy.* In practising mercy in our lives, we will receive God's mercy. This happened not as some sort of contract, but in the experience of being merciful ourselves, as God is, we draw ever closer to God. So, in turn, we can experience God's mercy more profoundly, while the failure in mercy is what separates us from God.

WEEK 4: THE BLISS OF THE PURE IN HEART AND THE BRIDGE BUILDERS

Here, we reflect on conflict. Firstly, the internal tensions we face, and seeking to be "pure in heart", with thoughts, motives and desires that are completely unmixed, genuine and sincere. Then we turn to the conflicts and divisions of the world, and the call to be peace-makers.

Blessed are the pure in heart, for they will see God.

NOTES

- ◆ In the Old Testament, the word for pure (*katharos*) is often linked with external practices of ritual or ceremonial purity. This concerns the outward enacting of specific cleansing rituals, or observing the rules and laws of ritual cleanliness.
- ◆ For Jesus, purity is an inward thing, a thing of the heart and of the mind – an attitude of the soul. Here *katharos* has strong associations with being the idea of being without blemish, and without anything added or mixed in. It might refer, for example, to pure water, milk, wine; or bread made from the finest flour; or gold or silver without alloy.

Blessed are the meek, for they will inherit the earth.

NOTES

- ◆ Who wants to be meek? To modern ears it means weak and spineless; submissive and subservient to a fault. But that is far from the original meaning of the word.
- ◆ In the Old Testament, it's a favourite word for the Psalmists. It means someone who, in loving and obedient humility, accepts the guidance of God - trusting God to provide and never growing resentful and bitter about anything which life may bring. It is someone sustained by the certainty that God's way is always best, and that God is always working all things together for good. Looking Godward, it describes perfect trust, perfect obedience, and perfect submission: "The Lord giveth, and the Lord taketh away; blessed be the name of the Lord." (Job 1:21)
- ◆ In the New Testament, the word carries the same sense of a tranquillity and stability in spirit. And – far from being weak – this is someone with great strength and power, but who chooses to exercise them with kindness and empathy. And it describes someone who is moved to anger only at the right time and for the right reasons, not at the wrong time or for the wrong reasons. Someone who is not just self-controlled, but God-controlled.

THE PROMISE OF BLESSING

- ◆ *For they will inherit the earth.* This image can be linked with the children of Israel entering the Promised Land and, in Jesus, means the opening of God's life to all. And this is not some distant promise, but a life here and now marked by peace and abundant love.

WEEK 3: THE BLISS OF THE STARVING SOUL AND THE KIND HEART

This week we reflect on Jesus's call to long for justice in our world – and on the true meaning of mercy: not to suspend a penalty but an outgoing love that is the opposite of a self-centred and selfish life. Then, in turn, to know God's mercy in our lives.

Blessed are those who hunger and thirst for righteousness' sake, for they will be filled.

NOTES

- ◆ The disciples listening to Jesus would have known about hunger and thirst. Their experience was so different from ours now, in a society which enjoys all the benefits of social and economic development. For that first-century Palestinian audience, hunger and thirst were frequently a matter of life and death – to eat and to find water were the basics of survival. They would have experienced the desperation of hunger and thirst, with no assurance of food or water.

It might be helpful to think about *righteousness* using the image of the cross.

- ◆ Using this image, the arms are open wide, to embrace others. In this sense, *righteousness* means someone who cannot rest, who cannot be content, in a community or society or world where there are unjust ways of ordering our life: where the law is weighed in favour of one colour or class; where the few have too much and the many too little; where people are treated not as human but as things.
- ◆ Then the upright beam expresses our longing to live in the right relationship with God. If we think of God as the stern judge and lawgiver, there can be nothing between us and God but distance, estrangement and fear. We can only feel disgraced and ashamed. "But," as William Barclay writes, "once we know that God is ready to accept us and to love us and to forgive us just as we are, the

distance is replaced by intimacy, the estrangement by friendship, the fear by loving and grateful trust." In his grace and mercy God receives us as good people, and in this we are made aright. And that experience in turn finds a response in our lives, in selfless service and unwearied forgiveness.

THE PROMISE OF BLESSING

- ◆ *For they will be filled.* God will not send us empty away, but will fill us until our longings are fulfilled, and our soul is satisfied.

Blessed are the merciful, for they will receive mercy.

NOTES

- ◆ We often think of "mercy" in negative terms, meaning to suspend the severe and rigorous judgement and penalty which someone rightly deserves. But the meaning of God's mercy is much more positive and translates as kindness.
- ◆ In the Old Testament, mercy is the basis of God's whole relationship with the people of Israel: it the outgoing kindness of the heart of God. And this kindness is utterly steadfast and true, and the basis of God's faithful promise to his people.
- ◆ And, just as God's relationship with us is characterised by mercy, so God wishes us to show mercy. It means giving to others the same reckless generosity we receive from God. It means an *outgoing* love, which requires us to be *outlooking*: the reverse of self-centredness and the antithesis of selfishness. It is an attitude where the needs of others make a stronger claim on us than our own needs; where the sorrows of others are more poignant than our own. And that outgoing love isn't generalised or sentimental, but focussed on individuals, where we are prepared to walk in their shoes "until we can see with his eyes, think with his mind, and feel with his heart".