

Matthew 5:1-12 Climbing the ladder.

Friends, you will be pleased to know that today I am able to bring you eight happy attitudes that will bring about great happiness for us all!

1. Achieving our goals of wealth and success; leaving others behind.
2. Always being fun to have around – the life and soul of every party.
3. Being strong, or beautiful, or rich, or clever; being independent, secure and in control.
4. Getting our terms agreed, our rights established and ensuring that justice is done.
 5. Taking revenge on our enemies.
 6. Indulging our greed and lust.
 7. Picking fights and winning arguments.
8. And (better still) avoiding all trouble or misfortune!

I'm sorry I must have my notes mixed up, that's the start of the sermon for the unbelievers!

Seriously though, it does seem more and more these days that those attitudes are becoming, for some people, the norm.

But where will it lead them to and what do they expect when they get there?

A few weeks ago we paid a family visit to Manor Park in Glossop.

As we had the grandchildren with us we quite naturally spent most of our time in the play park (always a good excuse for me to test out the equipment!).

In one part there are some climbing walls, the type where you have those small funny shaped blocks to grab hold of or put your feet on as you climb.

We persuaded Lauren (the oldest grandchild) to have a go at climbing up one of these walls. With much cheering and encouragement she eventually reached the top (don't worry it was only about 8 feet high).

"Go on" we shouted "get your leg over the top and stand on the platform"

"I can't" was the reply, "there's nothing here!"

Sure enough as I looked around the climbing wall there was nothing there, no platform, no secure area, just a drop back onto the ground.

Every effort had been made to climb, one foot at a time, one hand at a time, but there was no reward when she got there.

The only thing to do was to climb back down and find another wall to climb that would have a reward at the end for all the effort made.

But how does this connect with today's reading?

A month or so ago the lectionary took us to Mount Siani and the Ten Commandments, a clear set of rules laid down by God for His people.

There was quite a lot of 'you shall not', 'you shall not murder, you shall not commit adultery, you shall not steal'.

It's like God is wagging his finger, telling his people, just a parent might 'lay down the law' with a child, probably making them fearful or fear filled. Indeed we are told that on hearing these commandments, these rules, the people 'trembled with fear. They stayed at a distance and said to Moses, "speak to us yourself and we will listen. But do not have God speak to us or we will die."

And so here we are one month on in the lectionary and we find ourselves back on a mountain side again.

This time, instead of the ‘finger wagging, rule setting’ God, we have the God of love, who has come personally to address His disciples. But it’s not just for ‘the then’ it’s for ‘the now’, for us and for our fellow human beings.

These Beatitudes are not just a set of rules, this time there’s a motive, there’s a reason, there’s a reward. It’s an invitation to a way of living that will bring about true happiness and an inward and outward peace.

The peace we get is not the: ‘leave me alone I just want to sit down with a nice cup of tea and have five minutes, thank you very much!’

This is a deep inner peace, one that lives and flows from our very inner being.

When we centre ourselves and our lives on God, we become transformed, or as Paul put it in his letter to the Romans:

Do **not conform** to the pattern of this world, but be transformed by the renewing of your mind.

The word Beatitude is Latin for “an abundant happiness” and in order to experience this, we need to be joy filled, because we cannot be happy filled, or ‘happyful’, but we can be joyful and joy filled.

This is a joy that nothing in life or death can take away, were back to Paul again as he puts it;

For I am convinced that neither death nor life, neither angels nor demons, neither the present nor the future, nor any powers, neither height nor depth, nor anything else in all creation, will be able to separate us from the love of God that is in Christ Jesus our Lord.

In chapter 16 of John’s Gospel there is a section headed ‘The Disciples Grief will turn to joy’, they are confused by Jesus talk of His leaving them, but He assures them that ‘no one will take away your joy.’

These beatitudes are familiar to most of us as we have heard or read them and they are usually interpreted as separate promises, perhaps referring to separate groups or maybe individuals.

Each one starting with the word ‘blessed’, if you look at the Greek translation, ‘blessed’ it simply means ‘extremely fortunate or well off.’

Blessed are the poor in spirit, blessed are those who mourn, blessed are the meek, and so on.

What if they could be looked at from a different perspective?

That instead of being individual statements, what if they are as St Chromatius of Aquileia (AD340-408) put it ‘solid steps of precious stones, by which saintly souls and faithful can climb’, what if they are the rungs on a ladder, each one taking us to a higher plain and on towards that reward?

If we want to ascend this ladder then we need a good foundation.

I don’t know if you’ve ever watched someone put a ladder up they usually check and check again to make sure that the ladder is on solid ground.

In essence this is what those first disciples did for as it says in Mark’s Gospel; ‘At once they left their nets and followed him’ (Mark 1:18).

This was the starting point for all of Jesus instructions, the next is not turning back, or as Jesus puts it ‘No-one who puts his hand to the plough and looks back is fit for the Kingdom of God’

Can you imagine what would happen if we were to walk, run or even drive a car whilst looking backwards all the time?

Having established a sure foundation for this ladder, we are now ready to start the climb. And as we ascend from one level to the next, so each previous level will become the foundation for the next step.

We are told that each step carries a reward, but there is also a flip side to this as we try to take on each attitude, we could find the next attitude an obstacle to moving forward, there could be a temptation to 'fall back' to climb back down to the last level or that last rung on the ladder.

We're back to that climbing wall again, 'I can't do it' says Lauren trying to find another foot or hand hold, 'yes you can' we say as we encourage her.

Or to put it another way, as Jesus would say it 'yes you can, just follow me'.

We're not promised any easy journey, but the promise is there, that 'I will be with you until the end of the age'.

Each step of this ascending journey requires sacrifice, perseverance, and a choosing to place ourselves in the hand of God and the grace He offers.

To help us, each step has an action and a reward.

The first Beatitude or step says 'Blessed are the poor in spirit' this is linked to the foundation, this detachment from the things of this world.

When you think about it the very first rung on a ladder has less of a step than the gap between the others, it's there to set us on our way.

For many though this first step is a big step as we detach ourselves from the things of this world and attach ourselves to the things of God, and from that moment on we are to be completely dependent on Him.

With that done we now have a secure footing to move on to the next step.

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

Often when we hear this our minds can jump to the thoughts of bereavement and indeed they will be comforted.

But what about the times when we look back at the things we have had to 'let go of' or as I said earlier 'sacrifice for'.

Do we sometimes mourn for them, and could there be a temptation to step back to that last level, where we feel more comfortable?

Once we have detached ourselves from the things of this world and from the things God is not happy with (we could call them sin, but is that too strong a word?), then we are ready to detach from self as we take on step three 'Blessed are the meek', in other words those who humble themselves, those who give up pride and ambition, those who put God and the centre of their lives, those who put others before self.

Once again problems can occur here as we can look back and perhaps hunger for those times when we seek the attention and praise of others, when we want to be the centre and focus of our own lives.

God gave us choice and we face it here.

Do we fall back, or can we willingly and by God's grace, put others first, seeking their good, for the sake of Jesus and by that same grace move up to the next step?

This progression moves on, but not in our timing, but in God's.

There is no fixed time frame, but the sooner each step is completed, the sooner we will experience wholeness and a better way of living and be a better witness.

Just like the climb up the rungs of the ladder or that climbing wall, each step needs more effort to complete.

And that's going to happen on the next step.

Blessed are those who hunger and thirst for righteousness, those who respond to that original call to 'follow me'. They will have an inner longing for holiness and Jesus promises that 'they will be satisfied' or 'they will be filled'.

To do this we need to forgive and to show mercy, even to those who don't like us. But what if we find it hard to love and forgive? Do we just return to the last step and stay there, or do we ask God for the grace to help us to love, to forgive, regardless of how we feel, so that we can move onto the next step?

Blessed are the merciful is linked to the last step as we are called to willingly live out that righteousness; to love as Jesus loves us, to forgive as we have been forgiven.

The reward for this action is that in turn we will receive and experience God's mercy, his loving kindness.

Once again we have a choice as perhaps we are tempted to feel bitterness when justice doesn't seem to be carried out on someone who has hurt us.

We might be tempted to harbour that bitterness in our hearts and let it grow until it starts to push aside the things of God.

Or we can come to God and ask him to cleanse our hearts, to ask him to help us remove whatever it is that is blocking the path to him.

Maybe praying the prayer David once prayed, 'create in me a pure heart, O God, and renew a steadfast spirit within me' (Ps 51:10).

Thus creating a pathway to the next step.

Before we move on to the next step we need to make sure that we have willingly detached ourselves from the things of this world, from the things that are not of God and from ourselves, that rather we have a hunger and thirst for righteousness and are living this out showing mercy towards others.

If all of these boxes are being ticked then our hearts are being changed and purified, for as Jesus has told us, blessed are the pure in heart for they will see God face to face.

That is surely some reward for our hard work, commitment and actions.

But it's not finished yet!

What happens next is quite amazing, because with all that packed inside us and a changed heart as well; we will have that desire to be a peacemaker.

Blessed are the peace makers, we are told. It doesn't mean that we are going to wake up one morning and suddenly become a skilled negotiator or mediator between warring people or countries.

What it does mean is that we are going to become a willing messenger of Jesus into the lives of others, for as Jesus said 'peace be with you', so too will that deep inner peace flow from our very inner being to those that we meet.

Jesus tells us that our reward is that we will be called children of God or sons of God.

Children usually stand to inherit something from their parent or parents.

If we are children of God, then what a fantastic promise of inheritance we have!

That all sounds wonderful, but as I said before, some of these steps can be quite difficult or challenging and that happens in the next step.

Blessed are those who are persecuted for righteousness sake, or in other words, those willing to accept the suffering that comes from standing up for what is right and good, pure and true.

There is that well know phrase 'it comes with the territory', in other words its par for the course, and it's our duty as members of the Body of Christ.

Our reward is, as Jesus tells us, promised membership into the Kingdom.

If you're anything like me then you are probably thinking 'I don't know if I can make all these steps',
then take heart.

How many of us have experienced that first time when a child wants to make their way up the climbing
wall?

Do we just stand back and let them do it, or do we stand below them ready to catch them if they fall, ready
to tell them they will be ok as we put them back on perhaps a step lower than they had reached, so that
they can continue making that effort to reach the top and a secure platform to stand on?

And that's how it is with this loving God that we have, he's there ready to catch us if we slip or fall,
because he knows we probably will, he's there to tell us we will be ok, as he puts us back on that ladder,
so that we can move on one step at a time

It's like that well-known saying; 'every day in every way I'm getting better and better'.

To live the Beatitudes is to be centred on God and God's desire for our lives.

We live them one day at a time, one action at a time, one step at a time.

We live them realising that we are imperfect, that we make mistakes, that we need forgiveness.

But we live them with confidence in Jesus' promise of a joy and peace that only God can give.

Let's pray

Lord Jesus, thank you for your word and your teaching

Help us to become better disciples as we take each step and make each step with you.

So that we may become better witness for you, in word and deed.

So that we and all your people may have eternal membership in your kingdom.

Amen

May God bless us all.

Peter Igo