

**Sermon for Keble Mass**  
**St Philip's Collingwood, July 2014**  
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The Beatitudes mark the beginning of the Sermon on the Mount, which is itself the first of the five discourses of Matthew's Gospel. Through these discourses, and through the healing stories that surround them, Jesus shows himself to be the authentic divine Teacher, whose words and his actions perfectly cohere. He practices what he preaches, demonstrating the true nature of righteousness in both word and deed. In this sense, the Sermon on the Mount parallels the revelation of God to Moses on Mt Sinai. There too God reveals God's teaching to the people of Israel through the giving of the Law. Here in the Sermon on the Mount Jesus reveals his teaching — his definitive interpretation of the Mosaic Law — on the mountain, the place of revelation.

People tend to think of the Sermon on the Mount as capturing the essence of Christian moral teaching. Like the Ten Commandments, it is often thought to be about ethics, how we should live in relationship to one another. But this is a misunderstanding — as much of the Ten Commandments as of the Sermon on the Mount. The structure makes it clear, since the Sermon itself is carefully and finely shaped. Paralleling the Beatitudes at the beginning is the Parable of the Two Foundations at the end, both of which are on about much more than morals. And in the middle is the Lord's Prayer, with ethical teaching on either side.

The Beatitudes, therefore, set the scene for the Sermon on the Mt, and make it clear that it is as much about spirituality as it is about ethics: the spiritual or theological worldview that undergirds the unfolding of Christian ethics. Indeed, what it sets out, most profoundly are the values and significance of living under the reign of God, the kingdom of heaven: living our lives as community, as Church, by the standards and the graces of heaven, under the sovereign reign of God.

So what then do the Beatitudes reveal about the gracious rule of heaven? In the first place, the Beatitudes show that God's values, Heaven's values, are very different from the standards of the world. In each of the eight Beatitudes, certain kinds of people are extolled, counted as 'blessed' in the eyes of God — people who will be ultimately vindicated by God in the Great Judgement at the End-time. They're not necessarily 'happy' but they are 'blessed' which is much more important, more lasting, more significant.

Thus the world values success, self-promotion, power, achievement, competitiveness, happiness, the avoidance of suffering. Countless books and magazines tell us how to achieve success, how to construct our self-image, how to find happiness. At the heart of this message lie material successes that can be named and counted, and material possessions. But what the Beatitudes tell us that the gospel offers us another way of living and being under the reign of God. They offer an alternative vision of life under the sway of God's grace, God's desire for us and for the world we live in, which is suffering so terribly from the many lies of our culture.

So who are commended in this counter-vision of life? It's not the powerful who are commended, but the poor in spirit, those who know their profound dependence on God, who know — in the last words of Martin Luther — that 'we are beggars, all of us.'

It is not those who have found the secret to happiness, with their good health and their good looks, their secure possessions, their lifestyle: but the mourners, those who care about the suffering of the world, of others, who enter into God's grief at the state of the world. Nor is it those who are proud of their successes and who can market themselves, who can edit their CVs without a flicker of doubt, who know how to push themselves forward: to be noticed, to be rewarded, to be envied by others. But it is those who are humble of heart: not self-hating, not door-mats; but those who don't have an ego to defend, who can take criticism when it is deserved, who can see the celebrate the gifts of others without envy, who know their own failings and limitations before God yet also know they are loved by God.

It is not those who are complacent about their own life but those who live out of the deepest yearning for God and God's righteousness, God's goodness and integrity and justice; who are not content with the state of things, and with their own comforts, but long for something better. It is not those who are indifferent to the needs of anyone but themselves and their own immediate family and friends, but those who show mercy indiscriminately to all in need whether they know them or like or need them or not. Nor is it those who are distracted and anxious, self-preoccupied, blown about by every wind and fad and fashion, but those who are centred: centred on God and single-hearted in their devotion to God.

It is not those who engage in conflict, who assume that life is about winners and losers, who compete to show their superiority over everyone else, but those who love peace and work for reconciliation wherever they are. And it is not those who are spoken highly of and commended, who seek above all the praise of human beings, but those who are spoken ill of because they're prepared to challenge and to speak the truth.

That is the first point: the Beatitudes provide an alternative, they are counter-cultural, they display values that are different from those of the world— values that are deeply truthful and abiding, offering a new way of living and being, a blessed way.

The second point about the Beatitudes is that the explanation for the 'blessedness', in the second part of each, is entirely related to God and focussed on God. The first and last Beatitude explain that the poor in spirit and the persecuted all belong to the reign of God, the kingdom of Heaven. These people's lives show that they are dwelling under the gracious rule of God.

It is the same with the other Beatitudes. The hungry and thirsty will be 'satisfied' because they will find the pearl of great price that they are seeking: God and God's righteousness. The mourners and the merciful will receive God's comfort and God's mercy. The pure in heart will see God face-to-face. The humble will dwell in the land God has given. The peace-makers will be recognised as God's true children. In each case, the reward for such a way of living and being and behaving is God. Matthew often speaks in wisdom language of rewards and punishments: rewards for the good and punishment for the evil. But the reward in the end is God's own self. God is the origin and motivator, but God is also the end, the purpose, the final beloved goal. And that is why all these people are blessed. Because what they will receive is the sight of God, the beatific vision — and there is no place, no benefit, no reward greater than God.

Thirdly, and finally, the Beatitudes imply a Christology. There is no mention of Jesus in these Beatitudes; here he plays only the role of the Teacher. But elsewhere in the Gospel of Matthew Jesus lives out these values himself. Indeed, at one point Jesus explicitly says of himself, 'I am meek and gentle of heart'. Jesus himself embodies the Beatitudes: he is poor in spirit, humble, living for God's righteousness, merciful, single-hearted, peace-making. And the cross is the consequence of his life of total commitment to God's goodness and mercy and truth.

It would be easy at this point to speak of Jesus as a wonderful model for us, whose life and teaching we should emulate in every aspect of our lives and our ministry. But that is not going to help us much. Role models are important in their own way. But they're not enough. And Matthew also understands that. It is not only Jesus' death that is saving and atoning — not even just his death and resurrection — but also his life. That is why we give such stress to the Gospel reading and such emphasis to the Book of the Gospels. Here we find the whole picture, which we get nowhere else in Scripture: the whole of the Christ event — his incarnation, his life and ministry, his death and resurrection.

The Temptation story illustrates the point beautifully. People sometimes read it as a story about how Jesus helps us when we're tempted because he's been through it. But that is not really what is happening in that story — or, at least, if it is, it is there in a secondary sense. The main point is that Jesus re-plays Israel's story in the wilderness and gets it right. He re-lives our human story and achieves that dependence on God, that humility, that obedience of which the Beatitudes speak. Irenaeus speaks of this as Christ's *recapitulation* of our human story. Jesus recapitulates, re-enacts, out humanity and gets it right. In the whole of his life and ministry, in his self-giving death and glorious resurrection, Jesus remakes our humanity and presents it before God on our behalf. He offers it to us as a gift.

If there is a victory for us, if there is achievement for us, if there is success, that is where it lies: in Jesus' life, in his integrity of heart, in his gentleness, in his unfailing mercy, in his authenticity, in his utter dependence on God. It takes God to show us what it means to be human. It takes God to remake our humanity, and to remake it from within. And that is far more than a role model. Our humanity in Christ is already re-made. What we long for in ourselves and in our world has already been achieved for us.

In 1876, at the opening of the Chapel of Keble College Oxford, a few years after Keble's death, Edward Pusey — the great biblical scholar of the Oxford Movement — preached on the Beatitudes, and particularly the third one, 'Blessed are the meek.' For Pusey, this Beatitude encapsulated Keble's own life and spirituality, his simplicity of heart and his sincerity, both as a poet and a country parson.

Tonight, we give thanks once again for the life of John Keble and the Spring he brought into the Church of England. And we rejoice that, in Christ, we stand in the company of the blessed, including Keble himself. But we rejoice, above all, in the God who has achieved for us, in Jesus Christ, that authenticity and wholeness which we could never have achieved for ourselves.