



Fourth Sunday after Epiphany

30th January 2011

Micah 6: 1-8; Psalm 15; 1 Corinthians 1:18-31; Matthew 5:1-12

May I speak in the name of the one God, who is Father, Son and Holy Spirit, Amen

So we have here another beginning. Peter's pointed out several times in the last weeks how the readings in this Epiphany season keep taking us back to Christmas things – not that they're talking about Jesus' birth, but they're talking about what was revealed in Jesus, and yes, in his birth, to a few but more obviously what was revealed in the public events of Jesus' adult ministry: his baptism in the Jordan, the call of the first disciples, the fact that wherever Jesus went there were crowds, crowds gathering to listen, to be cured, just to be there where he was. A power, a grace from God being revealed in Jesus and people dropped everything to be near him.

For St Matthew, the gospel we're following this year, Jesus is the teacher of divine truth, so he places here, close to the beginning, a solid block of teaching, the three chapters we know as the Sermon on the Mount. In fact Matthew is so keen on Jesus that he has five large chunks of teaching spread through the gospel and he places one carefully near the beginning and one carefully near the end. So the gospel begins with Jesus' birth and then the baptism, and then this sermon. And at the end, he runs the sequence backwards – a large block of teaching, and then the Passion and then the Resurrection. So you have teaching and teaching, you have baptism and death, you have birth and rebirth. Matthew wants us to see that pattern, he wants to know that all of this mirroring each other in this way, that he's showing us that all of this is under the plan and the ordering of God, for revealing the possibility of salvation through Christ, the possibility of full life.

Now the Sermon on the Mount which Matthew presents here – we just had the beginning of it, the first twelve verses today - is plainly a construct, a gathering of things that Jesus said on many occasions into a single long utterance. And we don't have to think of Jesus saying all these and exactly these words on one single afternoon. And I hope that's not too shocking; John Calvin, widely regarded as a pillar of conservative orthodoxy, said the same thing five hundred years ago, and a careful study of the gospels in the last hundred and fifty years shows how Jesus' sayings have been used and reused differently by the different gospel writers, and one of Matthew's purposes then is to gather these together. As a sermon of course, it is not particularly long, that isn't the issue; it isn't much longer than this one will be if you're lucky, but it's very scattered. In the formation programme at Wollaston we tell people a sermon should be about one thing. But Jesus here says about twenty five different things. So maybe it's better to think of it more as an anthology of Jesus' key teachings, rather than a sermon as such. Although for Matthew clearly there is one unifying factor in

the whole thing and it is this: that it is Jesus, the teacher of divine truth, who says it. And Matthew makes that point very clear when he begins, ‘When Jesus saw the crowds’ - and we heard about the crowds last week – ‘When Jesus saw the crowds, he went up the mountain.’ Which mountain? Well, who knows, does it matter? If you go to Israel tour guides will take you on a bus trip up a hill, which you can call a mountain if you want, to some spot conveniently near the road so that the aged and infirm foreign visitors don’t have to walk too far, and there you’ll find the spot where Jesus taught these crowds this sermon, but you don’t have to believe that.

In mythology mountains are places close to the gods and in the Old Testament, Sinai, the mountain of God, was where Moses, the great teacher of Israel, received the law from God to give it to the people. This symbolic mountain tells us that Jesus is the new Moses, sent from God to deliver a new teaching for the people. And just as Moses dwelt on the mountain forty days and forty nights with God, so we’re told Jesus sat down, took his place, made himself at home; it’s only a small gesture but I think that’s what it means - he made himself at home on the mountain. But there’s a difference between Moses and Jesus. Mount Sinai was a place of danger, a place where no one could go except Moses and his brother Aaron who’d been summoned there. For anyone else to get near the mountain spelt death, and that’s clear in Exodus 19. But on this mountain, with this teacher, we’re told ‘his disciples came to him’, and not just the twelve - that group who will be picked out later – but a whole mass, clearly, of people came to him. ‘His disciples came to him’ – those who wished to learn at Jesus feet. And that ordinary little comment I think is revolutionary: Jesus is the one through whom all people can draw near to God – priests and laity, rulers and slaves, Jews and Gentiles, men and women – God give himself to us in Jesus and calls us to draw near, to listen, to let our minds and our hearts be changed.

So what did Jesus say in this auspicious first pronouncement? And notice how Matthew builds up to these first words. After the crowds and the mountain and ‘he sat down’ and ‘his disciples came to him’, then he opened his mouth and began to teach them saying...And what did he say? The words he said, in Aramaic or in Greek, were this: ‘Blessed are the poor in spirit’. But a better translation I think would be this: ‘How happy are those who know their need of God’; how happy are those who know their need of God. There’s not a single word there that is the same as ‘Blessed are the poor in spirit’, but I still think it’s a better version of what Jesus meant. Let me explain why.

First, the word ‘blessed’ is a religious word and a fine one, blessings are good, but it’s not the word Jesus used. There are two words in all the biblical languages and in Latin and in English, and we have to choose the right one. The nine sayings, the Beatitudes that begin the Sermon on the Mount, all use the word Greek word *makarios*, and that means happy, fortunate, to be in a state of wellbeing. In Greek you’re *makarios* if you’ve got a nice house and money in the bank – lucky you! You’re *makarios* if you’ve got a cheerful family and faithful friends; you’re *makarios* if you’ve just won Lotto. That’s what the word means. That’s what you’d expect a *makarios* person to look like. And then Jesus says you’re really happy if you’re poor. How can that be?

Doesn't make sense. But in the Biblical tradition of the prophets, the poor are those who have little or nothing of this world's good things and so they have to look toward God for help and God will not let them down. That's who the poor are.

We're all aware that houses and bank accounts can shrivel, family and friends can let us down, even Lotto can let us down. And what are we going to rely on when they do? That's the question. And Jesus says you're happy if you're poor, and Matthew has added 'in spirit'; if you look at Luke's gospel you'll see it just says 'Happy are the poor'. Matthew has added 'in spirit' so we don't get hung up on economic arguments, because it's not poverty itself, but what poverty does to us - knowing our need of God is good to be poor in spirit, to know our need of God, to stand before God with open hands, letting God's goodness flow out to us without measure. And that's Jesus' challenge in this opening line and the ones that follow, to recognise that all life, all good things come to us from God. And to be poor is not to miss out, but to be *receiving*, receiving without limit, for we're only poor in so far as we are open to that receiving, but as soon as we say 'I'm OK, I've got enough thanks', we set up our wealth against God's goodness and the grace, the flow of grace, is cut off. Not because of God but because of us: there has to be a receiving and we have to do it.

So Jesus in the Beatitudes is challenging us to see things in reverse. It isn't the rich, he says, who are fortunate, it's the poor because they know they need God's gifts. It isn't the comfortable who are okay, but the mourners, and the hungry and the meek, those who are longing for something more – the something more they know they can't create and only God can give. And if we as a Christian community are in tune with Jesus' mind, then this paradoxical, back-to-front teaching has got to be our stock in trade.

Isn't it interesting to hear this in other places, to hear how doctors these days are now talking not just about curing illness, but about promoting 'wellness'. It's recognizing that even if all illness could be cured and of course it can't, then what? Because there's something that we long for which is more than that, which is wholeness, which is wellbeing, which is human flourishing, and all of that may be aided by medicine and surgery; it may be equally aided by finding a good diet, by unlocking our body's energy, by meditation, but even these are only a means towards an end and the end or the goal is that state of wellbeing which only God can give. Western medicine is a form of human wisdom and a fine one with many achievements, and so is economics and we all love its benefits, and so is the Christian religion come to that – they're all human wisdom which unless they're open to the wisdom which flows from God, achieve nothing at all, ultimately.

St Paul is saying something like this in that mind-blowing passage from the first chapter of the first letter to the Corinthians: 'where is the wisdom of the wise?' he says. Hasn't God made a fool of this world's wisdom by choosing to do something utterly stupid - coming into the world, not in power, but in the weakness of a Galilean prophet, the crucified Messiah. Where's the sense, where's the wisdom in that? What does it achieve? But, he says, 'The foolishness of God' – the language is almost

blasphemous- 'the foolishness of God is wiser than human wisdom and the weakness of God is stronger than human strength.'

And Jesus is saying something very similar when he says, 'How happy are the poor in spirit': how happy are those who know their need of God. The kingdom of heaven is theirs.

John Dunnill