

St Mary Abbots, Matins

Trinity 13

Exodus 12:21-27

Matthew 4:23-5:20

This week on BBC News there was an interview with a woman in Haiti called Drapheka. She had been in church when the recent earthquake struck, waiting for her baby daughter Esther to be baptised, along with many other families. The church collapsed, and Drapheka was injured and Esther killed.

How can we hear her story, and believe Jesus's words: '*Blessed are they that mourn: for they shall be comforted*'?

Or more to the point, how can Drapheka hear those words, and believe that she will be comforted?

We have seen people blown up, and before that crushed in extreme heat while desperately waiting, against all hope, for the chance to flee Afghanistan at Kabul airport, not to mention being whipped by members of the Taliban.

And now those flights have ceased. What hope for those who are left, perhaps having seen husbands, wives or children depart ahead of them?

Yet we are told, '*Blessed are the poor in spirit: for theirs is the kingdom of heaven.*'

And how to say to a woman who has been trafficked to this country to work in someone's home or as a prostitute, '*Blessed are the meek: for they shall inherit the earth*'?

'Blessed' is the last thing any of those people probably feel, and for any of us to repeat Jesus's words to them could feel not just trite or unfeeling, but even dangerous and offensive.

We are so used to hearing the Beatitudes – they are at the centre of our understanding of who Jesus was as a teacher. And indeed, many who struggle to accept Jesus as divine often point to these words in praising Him as having moral authority, if only that.

This is no accident. St Matthew clearly prepares us for words of great significance: '*And he opened his mouth, and taught them, saying...*'

Plus, there are ten of them, prompting their being described as a new Ten Commandments.

And yet how are they not to be taken by those described as '*blessed*', as other than deeply offensive?

Well, I think part of the answer is that the vast majority of the Beatitudes give us qualities that we can all attain to: meekness may not be something to recommend to one who is oppressed or abused, but is something most of us could do with a bit more of.

The same goes for hungering and thirsting for righteousness; being merciful; pure in heart; and peace-making.

And yet, the crescendo of Jesus's rhetoric – and it is great rhetoric – comes when he switches from the third person to the second, and addresses his disciples, and the crowd, directly:

'Blessed are ye, when men shall revile you, and persecute you, and shall say all manner of evil against you falsely, for my sake.'

We cannot therefore avoid the sense that those who suffer the greatest slings and arrows of misfortune in this life are being called particularly blessed by Jesus.

Not only is His rhetoric built on this conceit, but it is at the core of His moral teaching.

I remember being shocked when I learned that the Catholic Church teaches that we should have a *preference* for the poor, and Pope Francis has taught that without that preference the proclamation of the Gospel '*risks being misunderstood or submerged.*'

Surely we are all equally loved? God cannot prefer some of those made in His image to others, can He?

And yet, it is harder for the rich man to enter the kingdom of heaven than for a camel to pass through the eye of a needle.

And the young rich man is told that all he has to do to follow Jesus is to sell everything he owns, and give the money to the poor.

In Acts we read of Christians sharing their goods in common, though, admittedly, by the fourth century St Clement of Alexandria had supplemented that example by teaching that we can only help others by holding on to enough property to be self-sufficient, rather akin to Margaret Thatcher's argument that the good Samaritan could only help the robbed man because he had private capital.

The Western Church has settled somewhere between these two poles: we do believe in private property, but those rights are never absolute. As St Gregory the Great taught as far back as the seventh century, '*When we attend to the needs of those in want, we give them what is theirs, not ours. More than performing works of mercy, we are paying a debt of justice.*'

The interests of justice are therefore always going to favour those in need over those with an abundance, and that is what is meant I think by the preference for the poor. It does not mean that God loves them more than those of us with plenty, but it does mean that because they are more in need in this life, He seeks them out, as we should too.

The Church of England's ordination rite tells us that we are tasked with '*searching out the poor and weak, the sick and lonely and those who are oppressed and powerless, reaching into the forgotten corners of the world, that the love of God may be made visible.*'

One might answer, that if God has such a preference for the poor, and they are so sought after by Him and by His Church, why are they still poor?

Well, the answer to that is quite straightforward. Firstly, we live in a fallen world. But also, while we might measure happiness and satisfaction according to our material comfort, in God's eyes the world is quite the other way around.

As much as we must recognise the real pain and agony of those who suffer in the world, and seek to alleviate it, those who are poor in spirit, or mourning, or persecuted, have little option but to depend on God; and the Beatitudes are clearly addressed primarily to those who are overwhelmed by the reality of their lives.

The rest of us can *try* depending on God, but when that comes in and out of focus, as we fall back on our material comforts, those *without* such relative wealth have nothing and no-one but Him to depend on.

In that sense, we should all model ourselves on those who have nothing, for our wealth is nothing in God's eyes, in the context of eternity. And whether we have material riches or not, the values of the Beatitudes, of Jesus, all remind us to seek those things which are its very opposite.

One reason I think the Beatitudes are so difficult, and so powerful, is because they hinge on the ambiguity of what it means to be blessed.

Do we think of blessing in the way the pastor of a mega-church might preach it, bestowing on us prosperity, a large house and beautiful children?

Or do we think of blessing as meaning closeness to Christ?

Close to Him in His suffering the very worst that humanity is capable of, in His Passion and His death.

And close to Him in His care for those who are oppressed, who mourn, who are persecuted?

We received the perfect opportunity for the latter this week. We are being asked for money and various things for refugees from Afghanistan, including children's clothes and shoes, baby milk and nappies, after many fled in only their flip flops.

The last time our giving as a church was looked at however, it was decided only to give £6,000 and to focus on local charities. I am thankful that that at least included Grenfell, but with hindsight nevertheless find that decision a scandalous one. We are now left without being able to give financially as a church to these Afghan refugees, though please do individually, and I hope we can glorify God by filling the St Paul's Chapel here with our many practical offerings for those most in need.

Because it is only through living out our faith, through fully inhabiting it, that we can we see God; be called children of God; and inherit the kingdom of heaven.

Only by living out the Beatitudes, in other words, can we truly be called righteous.

Amen