

Blessed are those who mourn

If you haven't been here for the last couple of weeks, you may have missed that we are now well into our sermon series looking at the Beatitudes.

If you need reminding of what the Beatitudes are, just look around the church. All the Beatitudes are on posters on the pillars, illustrated by our Sunday club.

Today we're on to week three, and we've got to 'blessed are those who mourn, for they shall be comforted' (Matt. 5:4).

Something I said almost in passing in the first week was about just how difficult it can be to believe the Beatitudes.

That is probably particularly true for today's passage, which is one that I imagine may trigger a lot of memories for a lot of people. It certainly does for me.

How can you believe you're blessed by God precisely when you're in pain – when people close to you have died, when you and people close to you are struggling and suffering?

That would have very, very true for the people who heard Jesus' message in the first century too.

Jesus' audiences during his lifetime would have had a huge amount to contend with. Everyday life would have been hard for most people. Many people would have suffered daily from poverty and oppression and violence. Most people would also have lost people very close to them. When Jesus said 'blessed are those who mourn', 'those who mourn' would probably have been most of his hearers.

By the time Matthew's gospel was written down things were far worse. This gospel wasn't written down until after the Jewish War. This was when, a generation after Jesus, the Jews rebelled against the Romans. The rebellion was put down in a spectacularly cruel way. Huge numbers were killed, exiled, imprisoned, or enslaved.

But Jesus had told his followers just a few decades before that they were blessed. The poor in spirit are blessed, and those who mourn are blessed.

How could the early Jewish Christians believe that? Their entire lives would have been lives of mourning: as individuals mourning their loved ones, and as communities mourning the destruction of everything that had been theirs.

Jewish Scriptures and Jewish history would, to a large extent, have prepared them for this kind of disaster. Today's first reading (Jer. 31:10-17) is one of many examples in the OT of God's promise and prophecy to his people that they will be saved and that they will be comforted. 'I will turn their mourning into joy, I will comfort them, and give them gladness for sorrow.'

The Jewish people had the assurance of God's love and blessing, but at the same time they had repeatedly gone through intense suffering. The key to understanding much of the OT is that it is a story of a people struggling and coping with trauma and suffering and violence. Yet somehow they continued to believe in God's covenant with them.

What happened in the Jewish War was yet another chapter of this very difficult history.

But between the events described in the OT (and in other writings such as Maccabees) and the destruction of the Jewish War came Jesus. As we Christians believe: Jesus' life, death and resurrection.

Jesus, with his message: blessed are those who mourn, for they shall be comforted. Jesus himself died; he went through what we go through, but in a particularly ignominious and painful way; but at the end he rose again, and we believe that means we, and all God's people, will also rise with him.

And when we do, then all mourning will be at an end, as our second reading describes (Rev. 21:1-5). God himself will wipe away every tear. 'Death will be no more; mourning and crying and pain will be no more'.

This is the heart of our faith, and this was how the early Jewish Christians (and the early Gentile Christians, with their own various struggles) could believe Jesus' words, 'blessed are those who mourn'. God had stepped in and given an assurance that present suffering would be far outweighed by eternal joy.

That is still our faith. If any of you have seen the film *The Shack*, or read the book, that is the fundamental message there. The child who has died is in God's loving care.

But *The Shack* also takes seriously the depth of the pain we still go through. Even if we have a strong faith, we still go through that. We don't stop being human and having human responses and human needs just because of our faith. If anything, faith helps us be strong enough to be fully human.

What we see in today's gospel (John 11: 17-35) is Jesus' response to this. Jesus knows very well that everything is going to be fine with Lazarus. But still, confronted with the deep sorrow of those around him, Jesus weeps.

Jesus, God's son, responds to human pain and suffering. He weeps with us. It is not just that God will make everything right in the end. God is also there when everything is at its worst. And indeed we may very well realise how much God was there providing even before the worst came. I have certainly had my own experience of that. We talk of God being past, present, and future, and that goes for our mourning as well.

As a final point, it might be an obvious thing to add that this Beatitude should also encourage us to try to be God's agents in comforting those who mourn.

I would say absolutely yes, that is true. But the heart of the matter is a divine mystery. My experience is that reaching out to comfort those who mourn will happen naturally once that mystery has touched us in some way. If it isn't part of our experience how death and mourning really are in God's loving hands, we are likely to be too scared to be able to reach out to others when they are in that situation. Once we have had that experience, it is likely to become second nature; but the strength to do it will have come from God.