

Sermon series, week 4: Blessed are the meek.

Someone recently commented: 'I wonder what will happen when the meek do inherit the earth'.

Which is a rather good question.

There are lots of ways of understanding this Beatitude. Most of them have been tried over the centuries, and a good few have led to problems – precisely because if you see yourself as 'the meek' you can end up justifying a lot of aggression towards the 'non-meek' when the tables are turned.

In the first century Jewish context, the obvious reading has to do with the Old Testament commandments and prophecies. 'Earth' could equally well be translated 'land', so you'll see what I mean. God brought the Jews out of slavery to freedom in the Promised Land. This was to be their inheritance. The Biblical account of how they took that land can be very uncomfortable reading. There were also conditions attached to the promise, which included keeping faithful to the covenant and ensuring that the land was dealt with fairly and equitably, that the poor were not dispossessed. Over the centuries, this was undermined in different ways, both because of foreign invasions, and because of the injustices of the Jews themselves towards each other.

By the time of Jesus the current foreign invaders were the Romans, and by the time Matthew's gospel was written, the subjection of the Jews had gone further with the Jewish War and the devastating Roman reprisals. To dream of the Jewish inheritance, of the dispossessed poor inheriting the land, for Jews and Jewish Christians alike towards the end of the first

century would have meant hoping and praying for a complete reversal of the harshness of the reality that they were faced with every day.

Christians, of course, very quickly began to interpret the Old Testament prophecies and promises in relation to themselves, whether they were from Jewish or Gentile background, and to see themselves as God's chosen people. So the inheritance promised by God was theirs to hope for.

Which brings us back to that question: 'what will happen when the meek do inherit the earth?'

A few centuries after Christ, Constantine was hailed emperor in York, and fought his way through to conquering the entire empire. Because he believed the Christian God had given him victory, the Roman empire became a Christian empire.

The meek had inherited the earth.

Do we see that as a good thing, or a bad thing?

There are plenty who see it as where things really went wrong. But that would be far too simplistic.

What it should do is make us stop and think about the relationship between the Church and power and society.

When people without power become people with power, all too often the 'meek' start behaving just as badly as the people before them. They become just as bad as the old lot. There are plenty of examples of that in Christian history.

Other sermons today will have talked about this Beatitude in terms of social justice, so I will only say a bit about that.

My main point with regard to social justice is to sound a note of caution. Talk about social justice can end up being just as inequitable if it's not treated carefully. There have been numerous movements that have started out very ethically but ended up going the way of repression and violence, in the name of social justice and redistribution of wealth.

Where I would put the emphasis is on the idea of inheritance. In Jesus' society, very few people stood to inherit. Power and influence were vested in very few individuals, and they were the ones very closely related to the head of the household, the father. Jesus understood God as his Father, so claiming that very close direct relationship of those who inherit. But he also claimed that for us. He claimed us as his brothers and sisters, as his coheirs.

In most societies at most times very few people have mattered. The experience of a great many humans around the world is still this today.

Christ's message is instead that *all* people matter. Because we're all children of God. All coheirs.

So when we say that the meek inheriting the earth is about social justice, it certainly is, but for the very fundamental reason that all humans are children loved by God. This is the basis to Christian social justice. Every human being matters and deserves to be provided for. If people at all levels in human society worked on that basis, we would already have God's kingdom on earth. Whatever we as Christians can do in that direction we are called to do.

But I want to finish today with a rather different point, returning to that first question about the meek inheriting the earth.

In the Church today there is anxiety about declining numbers and declining influence.

But what is it we are worried about losing?

Isn't a lot of what we're losing or have lost actually more like coercive power, which comes from being the meek who have inherited the earth, and have changed our assumptions and expectations because of that?

We've seen over and over again examples of the terrible effects of coercive and controlling power in the Church.

One of Jesus' descriptions of the kingdom of heaven is that it is like yeast, which leavens the whole loaf.

If the whole loaf, or even a tenth of it, was yeast, the result would be inedible, completely unpalatable. Is that what the Church should be – overpowering the world around?

Or, as Jesus' followers, should we perhaps learn to relax and trust him more? Numbers are not the question, power is not the question. If we follow our calling to live and breathe and share Jesus' message of good news, God can take that and use it to transform the world around and build the kingdom as he wants it to be – a kingdom in which we all learn to see each other as brothers and sisters, and the earth we share together as our common inheritance. Amen.