

Matthew 5 vs 3 – Blessed are those who mourn, for they will be comforted

St John's – June 17th – Chris Greaves

Good morning. Good morning.

I'm not quite sure how long you normally expect sermons to last, something tells me that you may be getting a bit fidgety after half an hour, so if you want a really short one today – well, I've just done it. Those two words - "Good morning". That's it. Those two words summarise the message today – the text for this sermon, the next in the series on the Beatitudes, is "*Blessed are those who mourn for they will be comforted*"

It's all about good mourning. Mourning spelt moUrnIng.

We can't leave it there as on the face of it, these words of Jesus don't make sense. As Anthony explained a few weeks ago, "blessed", is literally translated as "happy" or "joyful", but "fortunate" might give a fuller sense of it. So, "happy or joyful are those who mourn". Doesn't make much sense does it?

Let's unpack it. What is it for instance that Jesus is thinking we'll be mourning or grieving over?

Jesus doesn't spell that out, perhaps deliberately. We can take it then to apply to anything we grieve about – which could be things which happen to us - external things, or things we do - more internal. External first.

All of us will have reason to grieve or mourn things in our lives. It's not an aberration when that happens, it's sadly all too often a normal part of life – it's all part of the package – life will include loss and sorrow. I am trying to organise a weekend away with two friends at the moment. Talking to them, one has just learned he will lose his job and another that his wife has been diagnosed with breast cancer. Bad things happen.

I love the energy and enthusiasm of young people. That optimism of having all of life's opportunities in front of them. However I find myself having to hold back sometimes from saying "it won't always be plain sailing – there will be bumps along the road". Relationships that mean so much to us may break down; good health which we take for granted can't be guaranteed; our loved ones, whom we long to have long and happy lives, may suffer; our hopes for the future, for them or for ourselves may not be fulfilled.

When these things happen, and they will, have we missed out on God's plan for our lives? It may feel like that, that God has abandoned us. That's a common reaction. Even Jesus felt like he's been abandoned when he quoted Psalm 22 as he died in great pain "*My God, why have you forsaken me?*".

So, if sorrow is a given for our lives, what reason have we possibly got to be happy or joyful in such circumstances? The answer is in the second half of this verse – "*Blessed are those who mourn, for they will be comforted*". What form might this comfort take?

God may step in to change what is happening. We have a God of surprises. Sometimes we pray and things turn out far better than we feared. Many of us will know of people who were really ill and people prayed over them and they recovered when all medical advice said it wouldn't happen. A woman I see in church regularly shouldn't be here - doctors opinion fifteen years ago was that she was too ill to live. God can surprise us.

But sometimes we don't get the answer we want to our prayers. God doesn't do the things we ask him to. What we fear does happen. Where is God's comfort then? It's worth saying it's not because we have not prayed enough, or are not spiritual enough or loved by God enough. The Bible has many examples of people who were faithful to God and yet still went through great suffering. Think of Paul and his "thorn in the flesh". We don't know what this was, perhaps a physical disability, which he describes as tormenting him. Three times he pleaded with the Lord to take it away – but God didn't. Or Jesus in Gethesmene asking that the cup of suffering be taken from him. It wasn't. How can we talk then, of us, being blessed by being comforted at those times?

There is no easy answer, except that we know that, through the example of Jesus, God is no stranger to suffering. We know too that he is there with us, through our times of mourning, even if we can't see him. In Psalm 56 God is described as putting our tears in a bottle so he would remember them. Think of that time when the disciples and Jesus were out in a boat on a lake and storm blew up. The boat was being swamped and they accused Jesus of not caring that they were going to drown. He showed that he did care and he brought them through it – even though they doubted he would. We can feel swamped by life's worries and feel we are going under. But Jesus is still with us, though it might not feel like it, as he was with the disciples in the boat, even when the storm threatens to overwhelm us. *"When you pass through the waters I will be with you"* says God through Isaiah.

Jesus is not just with us, but he weeps with us too. We heard in our Gospel reading that Jesus was *"greatly disturbed in spirit and deeply moved"* by Mary's sorrow at the death of her brother and *"he began to weep"*. Jesus knew grief, he understands our grief. He is with us in our grief, even when it doesn't feel like it. That's why the support and comfort of friends and members of the church family are so important – a tangible expression of God's comfort. That's part of becoming a Christlike Community here in Caversham.

Yet some pain will never fully go away. I saw a friend last week, my age (so quite young!) whose husband had died about eight months ago. Through her tears she said that it didn't feel any better now. She missed him even more. She always will. Time will soften the pain, but it won't remove it. It will become part of her. It will change her.

Expressing that grief to others and to God is healthy and something we see a lot in the Bible – think of the Psalmist who cried out *"my tears have been my food day and night"*. That's a normal and healthy reaction to grief – it's good mourning. It's part of making pain something that can transform us. It can even give something to us in added depth and understanding...as it did for St Paul. He says in Romans 5 that *"suffering produces perseverance; perseverance, character and character, hope"*.

It's been said that *"Of all the wicked waste in this world, none is so sad as wasted sorrow. To pay the price and buy nothing with it"*. You can see that fruit of grief in people you meet who have suffered yet allowed God to be part of the healing process. Their character has a depth, a wisdom, an understanding. One of the comforts of sorrow.

Mourning then, at things that happen to us. The external things. And comfort from a God who knows sorrow, remembers our sorrow and is with us through it. What about the other application of this Beatitude, the internal things we mourn about? When we mourn not just at what has happened to us, but at what we have done.

We've referred to this already in our service this morning. We've sung *"Dear Lord and father of mankind, forgive our foolish ways"*. We've confessed that we have done wrong in what we have thought, said or done. Perhaps it's easy to say the prayer of confession, in familiar words, and be

dulled to the full impact of it. Older forms of service are more graphic – Cranmer’s 1662 Prayer Book confession – “we acknowledge and bewail our manifold sins and wickedness”. “Bewail” – when did you last use that word? It speaks of a depth of sorrow at what we do wrong. *“What a wretched man I am”* bemoaned St Paul at his shortcomings.

Do we feel that upset when we let God down? Do we both repent for what we have done and feel remorse for it? It’s healthy when we do. This also is good mourning.

The more we appreciate the seriousness of our sins the more we appreciate and rejoice in the comfort God gives us. What is this comfort?

It’s through Jesus. Through him our mistakes are forgiven and forgotten. We are loved and accepted by him, now and forever. Words that people long to hear in our culture today –we’re loved unconditionally and accepted by God. In the Psalms we are told that God *“remembers our sin no more..as far as east is from the west so far has he removed our sin from us”*. That’s our comfort, our reason for relief and rejoicing. Because of this Christians can be the most liberated and joyous of people, free from guilt, loved and welcomed by our eternal father. We don’t have to earn this approval – we just need to accept it.

Of course we’ll never fully experience Gods comfort in our lifetimes on this earth. Sadness will always be a theme in our lives, whether from things that happen to us or things we do ourselves. But we know, that ahead of us is a time when we can fully experience Gods comfort. It lies the other side of the grave. Now we have a taster of it, then we can enjoy it fully.

I was speaking to someone here recently about the feel that Friday has in the working week. You’ve slogged away and although the weekend hasn’t yet started, we know it is just about to. We know the work of the week is almost done. We can enjoy something of the relief and feeling of the weekend before it arrives. That’s where we are in our spiritual lives on this earth. We’re in Friday afternoon, enjoying something of the feel and benefit of the weekend, which is just around the corner. That corner which is just beyond the grave when we continue into eternal life. Not just that, but we’ve looked ahead at the weather forecast and although the weather this week has been mixed, with joys and sorrows, we can see it is set fair, for wonderful sunny weekend. A wonderful time in the sun. A wonderful time with the son. For ever.

“Your sun will never set again” says Isaiah *“and your moon will wane no more; the Lord will be your everlasting light and your days of sorrow will end”*.

“Then shall young women rejoice in the dance, and the young men and the old shall be merry. I will turn their mourning into joy, I will comfort them, and give them gladness for sorrow” We read earlier in Jeremiah.

A time, described in Revelation, when *“God will dwell with his people; he will wipe every tear from their eyes. Death will be no more; mourning and crying and pain will be no more, for the first things have passed away”*.

That is the final comfort which awaits us.

“Blessed are those who mourn, for they will be comforted”.