

Beatitudes 1 Judith Ryder

03/06/18 09:30 St Peter's

What you've just heard is what we're going to be talking about at St Peter's a lot over the next 8 weeks.

If you're a regular here, you'll know that for the last couple of years, after the big Easter season and Pentecost and Trinity, the red letter days, we take a big theme and go into it in depth.

This year, the subject is, quite simply: the reading we've just heard.

What we've just heard is the passage from the New Testament known as the 'Beatitudes': which just means these sayings of Jesus which start with 'blessed are'.

And the 'Beatitudes' come right at the beginning of what is known as the 'Sermon on the Mount' – a much longer set of Jesus' teachings.

Now, often, you'd expect the beginning of a lesson or talk to set the scene pretty clearly; and that's exactly what Jesus does.

What Jesus says at the start of the Sermon on the Mount, in these Beatitudes, is the heart of his whole message.

He starts by saying who is 'blessed' – who is loved, who is cared for, by God.

People over and over again try to limit this. People argue about who Jesus meant, who Jesus means, when he says 'the spiritually poor' or 'the meek' or even 'those who mourn'.

Particularly nowadays, particularly people who live in the affluent west, with education, peace, good health, long lives, liberated women, the rights of the child, all our political and personal freedoms – we feel that that doesn't sound like us. The people Jesus is talking about must be different from us.

But how would it have felt for Jesus' original audience?

I don't think there would have been anyone there who didn't feel he was talking directly to them.

He lived in a time and place where very few people had power or money or influence.

Certainly women and children didn't, to start with, and that's a lot of the people already.

But most men didn't either, only very few.

The poor, the meek, the powerless: that would have been a lot of people.

And even the rich in Jesus' country would mostly have felt powerless because their country was under foreign occupation.

And with no modern medicine everyone would have lost a child, a mother, a husband, a wife, or other people very close to them, just through the pattern of life and death – not to mention what people suffered through violence and political and economic imprisonment.

Death and loss and worry would have been everyday.

So what does Jesus start by telling these people? He starts by making it clear to them that God blesses them all, that God loves them all.

That is the good news he has come to bring, that is the Christian 'gospel': 'gospel' means 'good news'.

But – and there's a second side to the Beatitudes – Jesus isn't just about reassuring people who feel sad and powerless and hopeless.

God also blesses and loves and cares for people when they try to change the world: when they try to build peace, to be merciful, to make things better.

So the people who first heard Jesus say this would have felt he was speaking very directly to them.

They may have found what he said it very, very difficult to believe – and it's still very difficult to believe – but some of them at least trusted Jesus and believed it, and remembered and repeated it and wrote it down so that we can hear it today.

But what about us who hear it today? Does the fact that we live where and when we do make any difference, that our circumstances are very different? Is it less true for us?

Why would it be?

If it was for everyone then, it's for everyone now. The circumstances may be different, but the message is the same. Why would God change his mind?

God doesn't stop blessing and loving, and doesn't stop blessing the things we do to try and make our world better.

Today, there are three children being baptised here. This is a clear statement of trust in what Jesus teaches in the Beatitudes.

Their baptism today is a sign of how God blesses them, and blesses them each by name.

Their parents have brought them to be baptised into the Christian faith. That means: into a faith which believes that the good news of God's blessing and love is available to everyone. That means: into a church which tries to learn from Jesus, and to let that guide our lives.

To bring children into this is a very great joy. We pray today that these children really will grow up knowing what it means to be blessed by God, and to be a blessing themselves. Amen.