

Beatitudes 2

10/06/18 09:30 St Peter's, Mike Smith

"Blessed are the poor in spirit, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven." (Matt 5:3)

Last week we introduced our new sermon series focusing on the 10 verses at the start of Chapter 5 of Matthew's Gospel. In my sermon I reminded us that Jesus uses these sayings, what we call the Beatitudes, as a way to teach the disciples what heaven is like. The Kingdom of Heaven being the realm of God – both now and to come (as we pray for each time we say the Lord's pray). And I suggested that the word 'Blessed' could be translated "Being filled with God's joy" - for Jesus is trying to describe how God fills with his deep joy those whom he favours - now, not in the future.

So we come to the first of the Beatitude sayings - "Blessed are the poor in spirit, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven". I have the luxury of preaching again this evening here, so I'm going to offer us two different approaches to what this Beatitude might be about. Tonight I'll help us think about what this might mean for us, if we are poor in spirit. But for this morning, let's think more widely about who the poor in spirit are, and what Jesus is saying about them.

April 4th saw the 50th anniversary of the assassination of Martin Luther King Jr on a motel balcony in Memphis Tennessee. He was a man who dedicated his life to attempting to rebalance his society to ensure black people were included in society like white people. Of all his sayings, perhaps you may not know this one:

"Segregation is not only inconvenient ... is not only sociologically untenable is not only politically and economically unsound — these are not what makes it wrong. Ultimately, segregation is morally wrong and sinful. ... It's wrong because it substitutes an 'I-It' relationship for the 'I-Thou' relationship and relegates persons to the status of things."

Societies throughout the ages have been very good at excluding people- because of colour, race, gender or creed amongst other things. To be a Jew in Jesus' time was to be exclusive - you as a Jew were on the inside of the Covenant with God (you were God's people), and everyone else was outside. The Roman's classed everyone who wasn't a Roman citizen as inferior. And throughout history things haven't got much better - just look at the 20th century from the Balkans to the holocaust.

Perhaps we might think we are fortunate those days have gone. But we might ask ourselves who are excluded in our day. Let me give you a list of just some:

- Wheelchair users;
- Remarried divorcees;
- Parents with noisy or hyperactive children;
- Same-sex couples;
- Those with mental health issues (in many different ways);
- People who just don't find that sitting in rows being talked at and singing songs from an alien culture in any way helps them relate to God.

And let me suggest, the people who do the excluding of these people are the Church. We do not have a good track record of welcoming people who are different from ourselves, or who have specific needs. If you don't believe me, look up on YouTube a video posted by St James' church in Didsbury Manchester, and their vicar Nick Bundock. They were a conservative evangelical church who always taught that being gay wasn't conforming with God's will. Until the day when one 14 year old church member killed herself, because she had discovered she was gay and

thought that was incompatible with her Christian faith. The event ripped the church family apart, and set them on a journey which has led to them becoming part of the Inclusive Church network.

For these people, and many others, are marginalised from spiritual strength because they are not included by an institutional Church who proclaims with its lips that God welcomes all, but with its deeds says something quite different.

There is something about not being poor that makes us indifferent or complacent. So it is with those who are rich in their spiritual lives - perhaps those who are regular in their attendance at church. Remember the story Jesus told of the Pharisee and the Tax collector at prayer. The Pharisee prays and thanks God that he is not like the tax collector. Whilst the tax collector proclaims how unworthy he is before God. Jesus is talking precisely about this difference. It is the tax collector who is poor in spirit and who had the kingdom of heaven.

We note here, in passing, that Jesus uses the present tense: "for theirs is" the kingdom of heaven", not "will be". Those who think they are so unworthy, so spiritually far from God, so bankrupt spiritually - they are the ones God prioritises. They are the ones who know heaven, now. Jesus, at the start of his Beatitudes (his sayings of God's joy), tells us that those who are poor in spirit are those who God fills with his joy and who have the kingdom of heaven. Yes, Jesus starts his sayings this radically.

So we return to that list of who the poor in spirit might be for us in Caversham. The risk for us as the Church is that we almost become like that Pharisee - comfortable in our ways, thankful that we are included in the family of God. But where are those - perhaps many who would want to be here, if only we were slightly different and allowed them to be themselves. We are very good in Church at saying implicitly, "Come to church, but be like us".

The calling of the Church is always to be moulded into the shape of the Kingdom - to become Christ-like. And Jesus is telling us, that means to look out for those who are not here, and ask what it is we are doing that is stopping them.