



## Sermon by Rev Ross Pearce Highfield Road Uniting Church November 2, 2014 – **All Saints Day**

### Matthew 5: 1-12

---

Just under 2 weeks ago, Pope Francis presided at a mass to beatify former Pope Paul VI; a step on the way to sainthood. This term beatify – to proclaim blessed – is part of an approach to church and scripture that leads many to see the Beatitudes, that we heard this morning from Matthew, as some sort of job description for saints – for the blessed, the beatified. One more reason why the translation choice of blessed for this passage is preferred over words like fortunate or happy. The blessed are those who have enough faith to endure through poverty of spirit, mourning, yearning for justice, or persecution and abuse, and still feel the presence of God. Because, of course, the Beatitudes are some sort of impossible standard for ordinary disciples to try to live. This, however, is a misreading of these words of Jesus. These statements about people being blessed are not instructions; they are not imperatives. They are statements of how things are in the kingdom. Jesus didn't say "You will be blessed with the kingdom of heaven only if you endure being poor in spirit". He was preaching the Gospel - "There is no longer a cause for sadness, or feeling cursed, the kingdom of heaven is near and you who are depressed and mourning, who feel oppressed and abused can rejoice, for you shall be comforted. The time of God's blessing is here." Here is the dawn of the new age of the Law and the Prophets, made real in the presence of God in Jesus Christ. This is the living will of God and it begins with this potted gospel of good news to the poor in spirit, those who mourn and those who feel abused by power. Rather than a job description for special saints, here is the Good News for all saints; all those who look to God in Jesus Christ.

The usual layout in our Bibles for this passage is verse 3 to 10 as a block of 8 blessings, or two blocks of four, like poetry, and then verse 11 as an extra blessing in the normal narrative style. This is because the first 8 are "blessed are the ...", while the last one is 'blessed are you ...'. However, on closer inspection, and looking at the themes, it seems that Matthew had a different pattern in mind; he was thinking of 3 sets of 3, each set with a theme. The first set are about the situation that people are in – poor in spirit, mourners and the meek. The second set are about obedience to the will of God – hunger for righteousness, mercy and purity of heart. And the third set are about being active disciples – peacemakers, living in righteousness and being persecuted for following Jesus. Of course the whole 9 Beatitudes are about being disciples, because that is who Jesus is addressing, but the divisions are about task, attitude and the world's response.

Let's look closer at these three divisions -

- In the first set of 3, more than the simple practical difficulties of living, Matthew has framed these statements about people who need to hear the good news in a spiritual framework. After 400 years of prophetic silence and ongoing captivity to foreign empires, the people are poor in spirit and mourn for the kingdom of Israel, the people of God, and they feel themselves meek, frustrated at being impotent in the face of the Roman occupation. They yearned for God and needed to hear the good news of the presence of God once more, and they are the ones to whom Jesus preached and who responded in crowds.
- The second set of 3 point more to the messenger than the message. The crowds responded, and the next generation responded, because Jesus embodied, and then the disciples copied, a hunger and thirst for justice, an attitude of mercy and they were pure in heart. Not pure in heart in the sense of moral behaviour, but they had a heart purely for following the will of God. The role and mission of the disciple is difficult, but the blessings are there for those who walk with the attitude of a servant of God, who bring the good news - the blessing - to the poor in spirit, the mourners and the meek.
- And the third set of Beatitudes point to a role beyond bringing blessings to those in need. The hard tasks are in peacemaking, living the will of God, and bearing the name of Jesus the Christ. But, even those hard tasks come with blessings. The world will be against you – that is those who actively dismiss the will of God - but you are still fortunate because the presence of God is with you. And there is here a sense of a cycle of blessing. If, like the people of Israel, you get despondent about the mission and ministry of the people of God – poor in spirit, mourning the lack of the kingdom, or feeling meek in the face of the powers of the world - then there are other disciples who will bring you the good news that the kingdom of heaven has come near. You are then blessed.

The Beatitudes begin to unpack what Jesus preaching meant; what 'the kingdom of heaven is near' actually means. We are not deserted and left to struggle through life with a set of rules and unreasonable expectations, God is with us. Not just in the person of Jesus Christ then, but in our ongoing journey of faith and discipleship. Even when it appears that we are getting nowhere and the world is against us, take heart, you will receive the blessings of God's presence and the comfort of the community of God's people. And the main task of the disciple is to carry and live that Good News of the presence of God. To be the ones who makes the Beatitudes real and to carry on Jesus mission; the Spirit of the Lord is upon me; he has anointed me to bring good news to the poor and the hungry, welcome for strangers and visiting for prisoners. That is what it

looks like to be saints, to be declared blessed because we strive to bring the kingdom of heaven close to people.

The Beatitudes are not an impossible list of Christian perfection, or a promise of a future blessing for suffering now; they are the Gospel of Good News – 'You are not unlucky, or cursed, you are fortunate because God has come close and will bless'. We are not alone in this world, we are the people blessed by God with the ongoing presence Jesus Christ in the Spirit and bearers of that blessing to all who are poor in spirit, mourning a better life and feeling that the only way in this world is power and aggression. We are the ones who have been declared saints, holy and sacred through faith in God in and through Jesus Christ. So be happy, consider yourself fortunate because you are blessed in the love and presence of God.