

St. Andrew's Anglican Church, Douglas, GA

The Rev. Fr. John E. Commins+ Rector

Scripture: Matthew 5:1-12

"The Beatitudes"

One of my favorite places on the face of the earth is at the Sea of Galilee. Along the shore of the Sea of Galilee the view is simply amazing. I can just close my eyes and I am there! If you go to the top of a particular small mountain or hill, which has been named the 'mount of beatitudes,' you will find some amazing views, but also some incredible acoustics! In 1999 we were allowed to go out on the hillside – and I found a rock, under a tree to sit on, which can give you an idea of what it must have been like during this event from Matthew's Gospel. Rabbis in Jesus' time did not teach standing up – but sitting down. To give people an idea of the multitudes that gathered to hear Jesus teach – they have planted banana palms along the hillside to represent the people. I brought my little travel guitar and sat quietly strumming a song called "Lord I Lift Your Name on High." As I started to softly sing the words fairly softly – I realized that people who were 100 yards away were singing with me! That is just not normal! I really personally believe that when Jesus created this place He made it with the lessons that He would give in mind – and that everyone on that mountainside would hear Him.

When people describe Jesus as simply a "great teacher" - you've heard people say "oh, He was a great prophet, a great teacher" – they don't want to admit that He is the Son of God. They want to minimize Him, and I think it means that they totally don't understand who Jesus really is. Today's Gospel is the beginning of the magnificent lesson called the 'Sermon on the Mount', which takes us through chapters 5, 6 and 7 of the Gospel of Matthew. People often say what wonderful teaching the Sermon on the Mount is, and that if only people would obey what Jesus says there, the world would be a better place. But if we think of Jesus simply telling people how to behave properly, we will miss what was really going on.

These nine 'blessings' or 'wonderful news' that Jesus is announcing, are not saying 'try hard to live like this.' They are saying that people who already are like that - are living according to God's will. And because of that they should be happy and celebrate. Jesus is not suggesting that these are simply "timeless truths" about the way the world is, and about human behavior. Let me give you some examples:

- mourners quite often go comforted,
- the meek don't inherit the earth,
- And those who long for justice frequently are forced to take that longing to their grave.

This is an upside-down world; and Jesus is saying that with His work it's starting to come true. This is merely an announcement, not a philosophical examination of the world that we live in. It's about something that's starting to happen, not about a general truth of life – the way it is. The 'beatitudes' are gospel: 'good news,' not good advice!

Yesterday, Marilyn and I had the opportunity to meet a young woman. We had to go to Crosby Nissan in Waycross, because our leases are just about up. We were there negotiating for 2 new cars to lease. In the midst of what we were doing, this young lady, Meghan Kelley (not that Megyn Kelly) went to go run the numbers and when she came back she was white in the face,

and you could tell that she was not feeling well. I had to ask her what was wrong and she tried to say “nothing.” I told “don’t tell me ‘nothing’ – I can see that something is wrong.” Then she told us that she had severe abdominal issues which she has been treated for quite some time. She was about to head to the emergency room. I asked her if it would be OK if we could pray for her and I could lay hands on her and pray for her. Her reaction was positive – and after prayer, when she wiped away the tears, there was an immediate change. This was not me or Marilyn – this was the Holy Spirit. She was so much better – as if a light switch had been turned on and she was suddenly she was a whole new person – coming back to herself – the person we met when we got there. Even her manager, Jack, noticed and thanked God – profusely. Marilyn and I are grateful for the opportunity to share Christ’s love, peace and healing. This is what we are called to do - living the Gospel as good news. That is what Jesus is talking about here.

In last week’s Gospel from Matthew 4:17 we were told that “*From that time on Jesus began to preach, "Repent, for the kingdom of heaven is near."*” Here these nine blessings are the promises of that kingdom for those who live the repentant life. Those people who were listening that day, on that ‘mount’ would have understood them as promises for the future time of God’s reign.

Jesus said to His first disciples “*Follow Me*”; because in Him the Living God was doing something very special, and this list of ‘wonderful news’ is part of His invitation, part of His directive, part of His way of saying that God is at work and that this is what it looks like. Jesus is beginning a new era for God’s people and all of God’s creation. From here on in, all the controls that people thought they knew all about are going to work the other way round. In our world, most people think that wonderful news consists of success, wealth, long life, victory in battle. Jesus is offering wonderful news for the humble, the poor, the mourners, the peacemakers. The word for ‘wonderful news’ is often translated as ‘blessed’, and part of the point is that this is God’s wonderful news for His people. God the Father is acting in and through Jesus to turn the world upside down, to turn Israel upside down and inside out, to pour out lavish ‘blessings’ on all who now turn to Him and accept what He is doing. Please understand that the kingdom of God is not something earned. It is more a gift than a reward.

These blessings are called the Beatitudes’, because the Latin word ‘beatus’ means ‘blessed’. Jesus’ point is not to offer a list of what sort of people God normally blesses but His point is to announce God’s New Covenant. In Deuteronomy chapter 28, the people came through the wilderness and arrived at the border of the Promised Land, just like Micah spoke about in Micah chapter six. God gave them a solemn covenant. He listed the blessings and the curses that would come upon them if they were obedient or disobedient. Now here is Jesus,

- coming out of Egypt after the death of Herod. And so was fulfilled what the Lord had said through the prophet: “*Out of Egypt I called my son.*” (Matthew 2:15)
- through the water of the Jordan River and the wilderness being baptized and then going to the wilderness to be tempted unsuccessfully by Satan,
- and into the land of promise where He began His ministry in the magnificent Galilee.

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Jesus begins to share His New Covenant. And so the burning question: “when do these promises come true?”

Many Christians might be tempted to answer: “in heaven, after death.” And at first sight, verses 3, 10 and 11 seem to say this to us: ‘the kingdom of heaven’ belongs to “*the poor in spirit*” and “*the persecuted*,” and that there is a great reward ‘in heaven’ for those who suffer persecution for Jesus’ sake.

I think that this is a misunderstanding of the meaning of ‘heaven’. Heaven is God’s space, where full perfect reality exists. It is close by our ‘earthly’ reality and even interlocking or overlapping with it. One day the promise will come true – that heaven and earth will be joined together for ever, and the true ‘heaven’, which for us presently is not visible, or out of sight, will be unveiled to everyone who believes in Jesus Christ. Look at verse 5: (Matthew 5:5) “*Blessed are the meek, for they will inherit the earth.*” That cannot happen in a heaven in which we exist as all spiritual beings after death. I believe the clue that Jesus gave us comes in the next chapter, during the ‘Sermon on the Mount’ in chapter 6, in the prayer Jesus taught his followers. (Matthew 6:9-10) Jesus said “*This, then, is how you should pray: 'Our Father who is in heaven, hallowed be your name, your kingdom come, your will be done on earth as it is in heaven.*” The life of heaven – the life of the realm where God is already King, and sin does not exist, – is to become the life of the world, transforming the present ‘earth’ into the place of beauty and delight that God always intended it to be. And those who follow Jesus are to begin to live by this rule here and now – “*on earth as it is in heaven.*”

That’s the point of the Sermon on the Mount, and the ‘beatitudes’ in particular. They are a special call, a challenge for us to “try to live” in the present - the way that will make sense in God’s promised future. Will we be able to do it? God knows we are not going to be able to do it perfectly; He knows who we are – inside and out. If we make the effort and we try – then the future has already arrived in the present in the person of Jesus and works of Nazareth. It may seem somewhat upside down to us, but we are called to believe, with great courage and great faith, that it is in fact the right way for us to live.