

Sermon for All Saints Sunday at SJB and SSC oct 31 2021

In a moment I'd like to invite you to come with me, in your imaginations, to the mount of the beatitudes by Lake Galilee- -the location of our Gospel reading- -and see it, in your mind's eye, as some of us were privileged to see it in May 2,000 on our diocesan millennium pilgrimage. Before we do that though, let's just deal with the word "beatitudes" in case it's a distraction to anyone. It became a convenient title for this famous bit of scripture because in the old Latin version every verse begins; beati. That's Latin for blessed - -beati- -from which we get beatitudes.

Now, having got that out of the way, let's go!

It's a good idea if you're willing, to close your eyes to help free up your imagination.

Hemel Hempstead is now far, far away

We're standing near the top of a very steep, grassy hillside that forms a natural amphitheatre.

Looking out we can see a vast expanse of blue water fringed with purple mountains
the inland sea of Galilee

sunlight sparkling on the water

wild flowers in profusion cascading down the hillside

brilliant splashes of red, blue, and gold

Enjoy the sun your faces

The warm air full of birdsong.

It's hardly altered since Jesus sat here over 2,000 years ago to deliver his startling new teachings. The only addition is a simple convent-building inhabited by Nuns and their guests, and the lovely church of the beatitudes set in a beautiful wild garden.

Now let's lose these buildings and see the scene just as it was in our reading

- -Jesus seated- -as the rabbi was always seated to teach
- an eager group of listeners hanging on his every word

Now I invite you to keep your eyes closed and imagine yourself as a member of that eager group. Try to hear this gospel message as if for the very first time as I read it in a rather different translation: from "The Message."

Here it comes

¹When Jesus saw his ministry drawing huge crowds, he climbed a hillside. Those who were apprenticed to him, the committed, climbed with him. Arriving at a quiet place, he sat down ²and taught his climbing companions. This is what he said:

³"You're blessed when you're at the end of your tether. With less of you there is more of God and his rule.

⁴"You're blessed when you feel you've lost what is most dear to you. Only then can you be embraced by **the One** most dear to you.

⁵"You're blessed when you're content with just who you are--no more, no less. That's the moment you find yourselves proud owners of everything that can't be bought.

⁶"You're blessed when you've worked up a good appetite for God. He's food and drink in the best meal you'll ever eat.

⁷"You're blessed when you care. At the moment of being "carefull,' you find yourselves cared for.

⁸"You're blessed when you get your inside world--your mind and heart--put right. Then you can see God in the outside world.

⁹"You're blessed when you can show people how to cooperate instead of compete or fight. That's when you discover who you really are, and your place in God's family.

¹⁰"You're blessed when your commitment to God provokes persecution. The persecution drives you even deeper into God's kingdom.

¹¹"Not only that--count yourselves blessed every time people put you down or throw you out or speak lies about you to discredit me. What it means is that the truth is too close for comfort and they are uncomfortable.

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Now I invite you to open your eyes and come back to Hemel Hempstead- -to our celebration of All Saints. Or all Hallows. Or all the blessed- -they all mean the same thing.

We say we believe in the communion of Saints every time we recite the creed. It means The church in its widest sense. The church in both this world and the next.

When Paul writes to the fledgling churches that he's established, he often opens with a greeting **to the saints** in that place.

If he were writing to us today he would probably begin his letter to our three churches:
To the saints in the parish of Boxmoor, greetings.

Not because we're particularly good- -certainly not better than other people- -but because we've responded to Jesus's invitation to come to him and to follow him.

To see his world with a different perspective
his kingdom perspective

the startling new perspective that Matthew sets out in chapters 5-7- -The Sermon on the mount, beginning with the beatitudes.

Jesus's first hearers have expectations about the coming of this kingdom, but many of them, especially the religious leaders responsible for teaching the rest, are expecting it to bring instant worldly power for an exclusive minority. They're expecting everything to be on their own terms. They've totally misunderstood what the prophets have been telling them for centuries:

that God's kingdom is to be a kingdom of love

of self sacrifice

of equality and justice for all

a kingdom where God's throne is in every human heart willingly surrendered to him

inclusive, not exclusive.

This is why God finally breaks into the world in the flesh, in Jesus.

Jesus both **embodies** what it means to have God in total charge of his life and he takes it as the **main theme of all his teaching.**

Kingdom values turn worldly values upside down!

Not blessed are the self-sufficient, the rich, the powerful, the clever, those who seem to have everything sorted. No! rather blessed are those who know their need of God. That's another translation for blessed are the poor in spirit- -blessed are those who know their need of God.

What do you understand by the word "blessed"?

These are some definitions I came up with:

To be blessed is to know that whatever happens to you, you are unique and precious and infinitely loved by God.

To be blessed is to know that your life has meaning and purpose.

To be blessed is to know that your security does not ultimately rest in this life.

On a very personal note, my late husband John and I were always conscious of how blessed we were in a general sense, but strangely we became even more deeply aware of God's blessing in the last very difficult year of his illness than at any other time in our lives. I noted this in a journal I'd started keeping. I guess it was because we were so much more aware of our need. We prayed every morning just as we'd always done but now that John could hardly speak at all, I didn't say much either.

This seemed to give God more of a chance. Together in his presence we often seemed to feel his peace and strength and love in a new and wonderful way. It doesn't mean that life was easier or that we went about in a constant rosy glow- -far, far from it- -but there was a new perspective.

It was nothing to do with what we actually did but, as we could do less and less, so the blessing just in those times of almost silent prayer together, seemed to grow more and more. I can't explain it. I can only tell it how it was, how I recorded it.

During the awful months of complete lockdown Godfrey and I took to praying the lovely evening service of compline together and we often experienced something very similar as we prayed. We're trying to keep it up as often as possible but at the very least we always try to say the evening collect that begins "Lighten our darkness" and the grace, sometimes over the phone.

Yes, blessed indeed are those who know their need of God, for theirs is the kingdom of Heaven.

With the coming of Jesus the kingdom had actually broken through, but it was largely hidden. Only those who were humble enough to look and to listen with open hearts and minds could see it. Two thousand years later his teaching has spread over the whole world and the beatitudes is one of the most famous passages in all literature. Don't you find that amazing when you think of how it started in backward little Galilee, over 2000 years ago? No technology- - no media- -but it spread like wildfire.

A Self confessed atheist I know once said wistfully, "If all the world lived by the sermon on the mount ,what a different world it would be! What indeed!

Jesus never promises roses all the way.

But he does promise that one day the struggle between good and evil will end. His kingdom will come in all its fullness

In the meantime, if we acknowledge our need of God, we can know his blessing right now. We can be sure and certain that nothing, not even death, can separate us from his love- -not ever.

That's very good news indeed, the best reason possible for celebrating this festival of All Saints- -or all hallows- -or all the blessed. Amen.

Carole Lewis for 31/10/21