

**Sunday 29th January 2023**

**Epiphany / Ordinary 4**

**The Rev’d Cara Heafey**

**Call to Worship**

How shall we come to worship God?

 What gift can we bring to our maker?

 What rite or ritual should we perform?

 What sacrifice would be worthy?

**The desires of God’s heart are no secret.**

**We know what is required of us:**

 **that we do justice, and love kindness,**

 **and walk humbly with our God.**

*Based on Micah 6:6-8*

**Prayers of Approach, Confession & Grace**

Loving God, our souls sing out in worship

and all of creation bursts forth with praise!

For you look with compassion on all who suffer.

You shed tears of sorrow with those in grief.

You kneel in the dust to lift up the humble

and shoulder the burdens of those who are bowed down.

Great and mighty is our God, who meets us in weakness.

Sure and strong is our God, who meets us in our fear.

Glory be to Jesus,

who stands shoulder to shoulder with those who are in pain,

who opened his arms wide on the cross

to hold all the hurts of the world. **Amen.**

Holy One:

You invite us to come to you just as we are.

Your arms are open wide to welcome us.

And so we approach you with trust and honesty,

asking for your forgiveness.

If our words and actions have done harm…

**God of mercy, forgive us.**

If our silence and apathy have done harm…

**God of mercy, forgive us.**

If we have failed to do justice, love mercy and walk humbly with you…

**God of mercy, forgive us.**

Repair our relationships.

Redeem our brokenness.

May our fault-lines be the cracks through which your light can flood in:

liquid gold to fill the gaps and transform our jagged edges into something beautiful,

our fragments into something whole. **Amen.**

Hear the good news and rejoice!

There’s nowhere we can go, and nothing we can do

that would put us beyond the reach of God’s forgiveness and love.

And so, liberated by grace, let’s say together the words that Jesus taught us to pray:

***Our Father…***

**All-age Introduction**

*[This introduction could be led interactively, as a conversation. Invite people to offer their own answers or discuss with their neighbours. In a café-style or messy church setting it could also be led as a craft activity. Supply some glossy magazines for people to look through to find suitable images and make a collage together]*

Who do we think and speak of as blessed? Who are the people that seem to enjoy many blessings, and what do these blessings look like? Who do we consider especially blessed by God?

* People in high positions? Kings? Presidents? Prime ministers?
* People who are known and admired by many? Celebrities? “National treasures”? Social-media influencers?
* People with amazing gifts and skills? Elite athletes? Master artists and craftspeople? Composers and musicians? Scientists and academics? Those working at the pinnacle of their chosen field, or ‘polymaths’ with wide-ranging talents?
* People who lead religious lives? Monastics? Clergy? Contemplatives? Preachers?
* People with lots of money? Those who lead lives of luxury and comfort?
* People with large families and many friends?
* People who enjoy good health or live to “a ripe old age”?
* People whose lives are untouched by suffering or sorrow?

Today in worship we will hear some well-known words of Jesus; a sermon all about where God’s blessing is found. His words might sound strange to us though, as the people he says are blessed don’t necessarily seem to be enjoying happy or privileged lives. Listen carefully to Jesus’ words when we hear them read to us from Matthew’s gospel. Notice who the people are that Jesus calls “blessed.”

**A Prayer for Illumination**

God who speaks through scripture:

 breathe life into these ancient words.

Infuse them with your Holy Spirit,

let us hear them afresh today.

Open our ears, our minds, our hearts, and our lives

 to receive your truth and allow it to change us. **Amen.**

**Readings**

*1 Corinthians 1:18-31* | *St Matthew 5:1-12*

**Sermon Notes**

*Please note: this is not a sermon! It’s a disorganised collection of thoughts and suggestions that might be woven into a sermon, or that may spark ideas for your own congregation in your own time and place.*

The Beatitudes are so familiar, they risk losing their surprising and subversive impact. The theme introduction above is designed to draw attention to the jarring disconnect between the reality Jesus proclaims and way things seem to be. When we consider the status quo… when we believe that the way things are is the way they always will be… Jesus’ words seem ridiculous. He might as well be saying “the sky is green” and “the sea is dry” as “the poor are blessed”, right? In the 1 Corinthians passage, Paul agrees. He admits that the Good News of the Gospel seems laughable, like “foolishness”, back-to-front and upside-down, a “stumbling block”, an impossible dream. Name and hold this tension.

Can you think of times or places where you have glimpsed the alternate reality Jesus describes in Matthew 5? Here are a couple of examples from Oxford, where I live:

* volunteering at the Winter Night Shelter (a local ecumenical project opening church buildings to give rough sleepers a safe, warm place to sleep during the coldest months of winter). Seeing the guests being welcomed, served, treated with honour.
* the appointment of a trans outreach worker, whose vital and beautiful ministry is in part about proclaiming to the persecuted, those who have experienced rejection and hate (even in God’s name) that they are God’s beloved, and the kingdom of heaven belongs to them.

Share your own experiences/glimpses, giving examples that are relevant to your own congregation. Recognise that our efforts are awkward and imperfect, and they can seem like a tiny drop in the ocean. Notice, celebrate and give thanks for them, nonetheless.

An important key to Matthew 5:1-12 is to refer back to the last few verses of Matthew 4 to discover *whom* Jesus was speaking to/about. Chapter 4:23-25 reads:

*Jesus went throughout Galilee, teaching in their synagogues and proclaiming the good news of the kingdom and curing every disease and every sickness among the people. So his fame spread throughout all Syria, and they brought to him all the sick, those who were afflicted with various diseases and pains, demoniacs, epileptics, and paralytics, and he cured them. And great crowds followed him…*

This is important. Out of context we might hear Jesus’ words as a directive to grieve, to be persecuted, to be poor in spirit, etc, but not grasp why (other than to put ourselves in line for blessing). Out of context we might misunderstand his words as glorifying suffering. The end of chapter 4 reveals that Jesus is pronouncing God’s blessing on *the very people he was speaking to.* He was looking out at a crowd of people who were broken in body and spirit, who were colonised and oppressed, who had experienced persecution, who were exploited by those in power, and his heart was breaking with compassion for them. He was telling them, “Blessed are *you… You* will inherit the earth… *You* will receive mercy… *You* will be called children of God.”

In the wider context of Matthew’s gospel, this passage comes at the very start of Jesus’ ministry. He has just called his first disciples (4:18-22). Now, in the beatitudes, he lays out what it is he has called them to. These “blessed are…” statements can be read as a mission statement, a vision, a manifesto for the new community.

I have read that the verb translated “comfort” in verse 4 is more forceful and active in the Greek. The verse could be translated, “blessed are those who mourn, for they will receive *advocacy*.”[[1]](#footnote-1) This suggests more than just soothing a hurt. It calls for justice. Like with victim impact statements that are read aloud in court; their voices will be heard, their pain acknowledged. This resonates with the etymology of the English word “comfort”, which comes from the Latin *comfortare* meaning “strengthen.” We might think of comfort as a soft thing, like wrapping a blanket around someone’s shoulders, but perhaps this is comfort that empowers, restoring agency.

Although Jesus’ words are in discord with the status quo, they are in harmony with the prophetic tradition in which he stands. Prophets of the Hebrew Scriptures like Micah, Amos and Jeremiah also spoke of God’s solidarity with the oppressed, poor and marginalised. Jesus’ mother Mary, in the words we call the Magnificat, spoke of God inaugurating a reversal of fortunes, the wealthy and powerful being brought low and the poor lifted up (Luke 1:52-53).

There are a number of points that could be made in a sermon on these 2 powerful passages. It will be for you to discern the message your own community needs to hear, but here are some possibilities that I can think of:

* **Jesus/God/Christianity is for losers** (this could be a good, provocative sermon title!): A reminder that God has favourites, and they are not, in fact, the people we might think of as “blessed”. They are the people who are losing out, the ones who are crushed, excluded and harmed by unjust systems that serve the interests of the powerful at the expense of the poor. In following Jesus we reject a “prosperity gospel” and the misuse of God’s name to sanctify the status quo. We pledge our allegiance to a different dream for the earth and its people, one that liberates and lifts up.
* **Solidarity with the shaken[[2]](#footnote-2)**: To those among us who are grieving… victims of discrimination or injustice… those experiencing economic hardship… those who are hungry for change, or longing for peace… *(an opportunity here to name some of the particular challenges faced by your community)*… You are God’s beloved. Jesus sees you, stands in solidarity with you, calls you blessed. As followers of Jesus we are called into solidarity with the suffering. To grieve alongside. To listen and learn. To be allies and advocates. May our church be a place of safety and welcome.
* **Noticing and celebrating glimpses of God’s upside-down kingdom**: A good ‘epiphany’ theme and a message of hope. When we recognise how entrenched and entangled we are in seemingly intractable systems that perpetuate inequality, it can be tempting to succumb to apathy and despair. The beatitudes dare to dream that things can be different (a bit like Martin Luther King’s “I have a dream” speech). The parables Jesus tells about the kingdom suggest that it’s at work in the small and the hidden and the ordinary… an underground, grassroots movement. This is an opportunity to affirm and empower your congregation. No act of resistance, kindness, mercy or solidarity is too small. “You are the salt of the earth… you are the light of the world…” (Matthew 5:13-14).

**Prayers of Intercession**

*With call and response:* Your kingdom come, **Your will be done.**

God of justice, we pray for those whose dignity is eroded by poverty.

 Those whose choices in life are limited.

 Those who are trapped by debt.

 We know that you see and hear

 those whose suffering is hidden from view.

 Help us to help in practical ways,

 to hold those in power to account,

 and to use what power we have to dismantle injustice.

Your kingdom come, **Your will be done.**

God of compassion, bring your comfort

to all who are walking through the valley of grief.

 May they sense you walking beside them.

Make us gentle companions,

generous and warm in our listening,

faithful witnesses to suffering and bearers of your peace.

 Your kingdom come, **Your will be done.**

God of mercy,

we pray for the places where mistrust and violence simmer.

Where communities are divided.

Where old tensions smoulder or are fanned into flame.

We pray for refugees, and those attempting to live their lives

amidst the carnage and wreckage of war.

This morning we remember… *(name places and situations where there is conflict)*

Into these places and situations:

Your kingdom come, **your will be done.**

Holy Spirit, we give thanks for the way

you move among and between us,

overcoming barriers of class and culture,

driving us out of our comfort zones,

leading us into encounter.

We give thanks for places and projects

where shining glimpses of your kingdom can be seen…

*(name some examples dear to your congregation here…)*

 Through the small and the ordinary,

 and through our own imperfect, hopeful actions:

Your kingdom come, **your will be done.**

Finally, we pray for ourselves.

In our suffering, may we know your solidarity.

In our apathy, kindle hope and a hunger for justice.

 May compassion break us open,

 open to hear other perspectives,

open to dream new possibilities.

In our hearts and in our lives: Your kingdom come, **Your will be done. Amen.**

**Blessing**

*(This prayer of uncertain origin is known as ‘a Franciscan Blessing’. It seems a fitting sending out prayer for today):*

May God bless you with discomfort at easy answers, half-truths, and superficial relationships, so that you may live deep within your heart.

May God bless you with anger at injustice, oppression and exploitation of people, so that you may work for justice, freedom and peace.

May God bless you with tears to shed for those who suffer from pain, rejection, starvation, and war, so that you may reach out your hand to comfort them and turn their pain to joy.

And may God bless you with enough foolishness to believe that you can make a difference in this world, so that you can do what others claim cannot be done. **Amen.**

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| **Hymn Suggestions** |
|  | CH4 | MP | R&S | StF |
| God of justice, Saviour to all |  | 1174 |  | 699 |
| Heaven shall not wait | 362 |  |  | 701 |
| In an age of twisted values |  |  |  | 703 |
| Show me how to stand for justice |  |  |  | 713 |
| Inspired by love and anger | 253 |  |  |  |
| All I once held dear | 506 | 799 |  | 489 |
| Beauty for brokenness | 259 | 806 |  | 693 |
| God of freedom, God of justice |  |  | 625 |  |
| Make me a channel of your peace | 528 | 456 | 629 | 707 |
| From heaven you came, helpless babe | 374 | 162 | 522 | 272 |
| For ourselves no longer living |  |  | 520 |  |

*CH4 – Church Hymnary 4* | *MP – Mission Praise* | *RS – Rejoice & Sing* | *StF – Singing the Faith*

**Other hymns (not found in our usual hymn books, but worth seeking out):**

**I Dream of a Church**

*(written by Kevin Snyman, lyric video available here:* <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=cFCIshHlrsM> *)*

**What does the Lord require of you?**

*(a lovely, simple setting of Micah 6:8 sung in 3 parts)*

The Faith we Sing 2174, Glory to God 70.

Works well as an offertory song.

**More creative ideas for worship – or suggestions to take with us into the week ahead:**

Praying the beatitudes as body-prayer:<http://www.belovedlife.org/beloved-life-body-prayer-the-beatitudes/>

Writing our own beatitudes: bearing in mind whom Jesus calls “blessed”, try writing some beatitudes for today’s world, or for your own community.

1. See commentary by Raj Nadella: <https://www.workingpreacher.org/commentaries/revised-common-lectionary/all-saints-sunday/commentary-on-matthew-51-12> (accessed 23/09/2022) [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. For more on this, see Graham Adams’ brilliant book *Holy Anarchy* (2022, SCM Press) [↑](#footnote-ref-2)