

## THE BEATITUDES

**Blessed are the poor in spirit for theirs is the kingdom of heaven**

**(Matthew 5:3)**

I am starting a series of sermons on the Beatitudes and I begin this evening with the first: ‘Blessed are the poor in spirit for theirs is the kingdom of heaven@ - Matthew 5:3.

Before beginning, a word about the Beatitudes in general. The first thing to note is that Jesus, in giving us the Beatitudes, is telling us not so much how to behave or how to conduct ourselves but he is telling us what sort of a person God wants us to be. So the Beatitudes are about our character – and personality – our attitude towards others but especially towards God.

Someone has said (and I regret my notes do not reveal whom) that the Beatitudes are attitudes of being, not of doing. So I suppose one could say that’s why they are called Be-attitudes and not Do-attitudes.

Billy Graham described them – rather delightfully I think – as the “beautiful attitudes” saying that they qualify for the adjective “beautiful” – not so much for the beauty of their language (though that is beauty enough) but for the beauty of their insight and of their incomparable value to us in our walk with God through life in this world and into the next.

They have been called the finest prescription for mental and spiritual health that has ever been given to humanity. Anyway – enough of introduction – time now to concentrate on the Beatitude I’m looking at this evening. And to remind you again of what it is **“Blessed are the poor in spirit, for theirs is the Kingdom of Heaven”**.

To understand this, or indeed any of the other beatitudes, one needs to understand what the word our Bibles translate as “Blessed” really means – because the original Greek word, ‘makarios’, does not translate exactly into English as “blessed”. Unfortunately there is no exact equivalent of the Greek word in the English language.

In ordinary speech the Greek word would normally be translated into English as “happy” but, particularly in the context of the Beatitudes, it means much more

than the rather casual, temporary feeling of joy which we generally associate with happiness.

One commentator I read thought that the word *makarios* could best be translated as “blissfully happy” but I’m not too convinced that that’s entirely accurate either – particularly as next time I shall be looking at the Beatitude “Blessed are those who mourn” and my experience, sadly very personal in these past few months, is that those who mourn have no desire to generate an air of blissful happiness – but rather the reverse.

No, I think the Greek word ‘*makarios*’ can best be translated by understanding the human condition which the word is describing – and what it is describing is the best possible position or condition that one can be in and which one can benefit from. It implies that the particular circumstance in question is very beneficial for one’s life and that one is blessed by it – as for example I might say that I am very blessed to have very supportive children – or I’m very blessed to belong to this church with all the delightful people who belong to it, all of which gives me an inner sense of joy and of well-being. I know how fortunate I am – how blessed I am to be in that position. So I think that “Blessed” is the best translation of the original word in the Greek – and that’s how it has been translated in our bibles down the years.

Anyway, moving on, Jesus tells us that ‘Blessed are the poor in Spirit’ so what does “poor in Spirit” mean? First, what doesn’t it mean? Well, it doesn’t mean and as nothing to do with material poverty. Jesus is not perversely trying to persuade us to feel blessed or privileged if we find ourselves in circumstances of hunger or want. Nor does it mean spiritual poverty in the sense of having a poor faith. There is nothing blessed in a poverty stricken prayer life or in half-hearted worship – or in only a token relationship with God.

So, if poor means none of those things, then what does it mean? In answering that, first one needs to realise that the word ‘Poor’ is a very relative word – and what I mean by that is best explained by examples. There are many people in this country who live well below what is called the poverty line – many now dependent on food banks for survival – but the vast majority of these people do have the comfort of a home and somewhere to lay their head at night. Such are their circumstances that they would be looked at with envy as being positively rich by the starving thousands in war torn Gaza – or India – or in many other places in the world where so many people have absolutely nothing.

Then again, there are those who are exceedingly poor and, though they have nowhere near enough, they do have a little and they are determined to survive on that little because their pride prevents them from asking for help. Instead, they struggle on in their hardship – living in misery and isolation with no hope for the future – but very determined to maintain their independence.

Again, compare those people with people who have absolutely nothing – some of them even less than nothing as they're up to their eyes in debt with no hope of getting out of it. They know that they cannot survive on their own – that they cannot survive without help – so they need to throw themselves on the mercy of whoever is prepared to offer them a lifeline and, beyond that, some hope for the future.

That is being truly poor – it's being so poor that you realise that you just cannot exist on your own – and that extreme poverty is what the original Greek word – translated in our Bibles as “poor” actually means. And so to be “poor in Spirit” as Jesus is saying here in this Beatitude we should be – is to come before God with that attitude – with the realisation that we have nothing – that there is nothing we can do – there's nothing we can bring which will enable us to gain entry into the kingdom of Heaven on our own.

We cannot make ourselves worthy of God by our own efforts. We may find that hard to accept – we may think we have a lot going for us – but whatever we may think we have, it is nowhere near enough.

Basically we are all unworthy sinners – some more unworthy than others it is true – but the only way any of us can make ourselves right with God and acceptable to Him is to come before Him with empty hands and outstretched arms, realising our need of Him – realising our poverty – realising that we have nothing and deserve nothing – instead seeking his generosity, his grace, his forgiveness, his love. And, if we do come before Him like that, He welcomes us and gives us what we seek – we have his word that that is what he will do.

And, it's when we come before him like that that we are truly blessed – because, as Jesus tells us in this Beatitude when we come before him like that He guarantees us a place in his Kingdom.

**“Blessed are the poor in Spirit for theirs is the Kingdom of Heaven”**