

BLESSED ARE THE MERCIFUL
TOM PERYER - ALL SAINTS WESTON
Exodus 19:10-13; 16-19 | Exodus 20:18-19 | Matthew 5:1-12

Let's begin with this story: A man walks into a dog-friendly pub with his dog and takes a seat in the corner. He quietly reads a book. Soon another man appears, sits down at the next table and also reads a book. That man has placed his hat on a chair.

It is not long before the dog takes said hat in mouth and begins to chew it. When the hat's owner sees what is happening, he snatches his hat from the dog's mouth but – too late - the damage has been done. He begins to remonstrate and berate the dog's owner for not keeping control of his dog.

The dog's owner is not at all apologetic, but rather blames the man for leaving the hat within reach of the dog, says it is not too badly damaged and there are worse things happening in the world.

Finally, the aggrieved hat-owner shouts at the man "Frankly I think your attitude is appalling" to which the dog owner replies (can you see it coming?)

"Pal, it's not my hat 'ee chewed but your hat 'ee chewed!"

Which brings us nicely to the topic we are reflecting on for three Sundays - The "Be-Attitudes" which are the prelude or prologue to what is usually known as Jesus' Sermon on the Mount.

INTRODUCTION B:
TAIZÉ AND JOY, SIMPLICITY & MERCY

If you were here last Sunday, you will know that we are reflecting on the Beatitudes for 3 weeks, because Emma was inspired by her visit to Taizé in France last month when she went with a group from the diocese, led by Bishop Michael. And throughout the week, they were there in that amazing international gathering of thousands of people who come week by week all year round. And whilst there they listened to daily expositions of the Beatitudes.

As I expect many of you know, Taizé was founded by a Swiss-born Christian, known as Brother Roger, who bought a couple of derelict cottages in France during World War II, where he helped those who were in need, including Jews running from their Nazi oppressors. After the war, he stayed on and initiated a new community of brothers, inspired by St Benedict and his rule of life. Brother Roger wrote a rule of life for his emerging community and the first rule was this:

'Preserve at all times an inner silence so as to live in Christ's presence and thereby cultivate the spirit of the Beatitudes – joy, simplicity and mercy.'

There is certainly all three of these qualities present in Taizé: Joy, simplicity and mercy – and they are there in the Beatitudes if you search for them. We are blessed indeed if they are present in our own lives and present in this church. I think we are strong on two of them but maybe not so strong on one. I'll leave you to think about that!

Last week Emma specially focused on the first four of the Beatitudes and the joy that comes from living out the Beatitudes. I have been given two of the 8 beatitudes to speak on:

"Blessed are the merciful, for they shall receive mercy"

And

"Blessed are the pure in heart, for they shall see God"

INTRODUCTION C:

MOSES AND JESUS – LAW & GRACE

But just before I speak on those two, I want to draw your attention to something that struck me very much in the week as I prepared my talks for the Tuesday service and for this morning - and that is the contrast between an event in the Old Testament and this sermon on the mount. I am of course referring to the Old Testament reading we had when Moses went up the mountain to receive the 10 commandments and many other commandments from God. As you listened to the two readings, I wonder if you were struck by the similarities and contrasts between them.

Firstly, the Old Testament dramatic event on Mount Sinai,

Mount Sinai was covered with smoke, because the Lord descended on it in fire...and the whole mountain trembled violently The Lord descended to the top of Mount Sinai and called Moses to the top of the mountain.

Now for the New Testament – the New Covenant

Now when Jesus saw the crowds, he went up on a mountainside and sat down. His disciples came to him, and he opened his mouth and began to teach them.

Now mountains are very important in the Old Testament because a number of highly significant events take place. But the most important mountain episode and one which would be as familiar to the Jewish people, as is the story of Christmas and Easter to us, is the one where Moses goes up the mountain to commune with God and receive the 10 commandments. It is one of the absolute key moments of the Old Testament. And it was a terrifying event.

When the people saw the thunder and lightning and heard the trumpet and saw the mountain in smoke, they trembled with fear.

Only Moses was allowed to go onto the mountain. God himself was hidden from their sight. There were dire warnings about death if anyone strayed onto the mountains. And when Moses finally comes down, he is carrying with him on stone laws and laws with penalties attached to them if they are broken. And what he finds when he returns horrifies him - but that is not for today.

And now let us turn our eyes to a scene which does not have thunder and lightning or gloom and terror. Here is Jesus – very God and very Man - sitting down, yes sitting down with just his disciples gathered around him as he quietly and gently describes a new way, a different way of living. These are not words to be written on stone; these are words to be taken to heart and written on our hearts. Jesus is presenting us with a way of living not based on “Thou shalt” and “Thou shalt not” but a way of living that says *“If you want to be truly happy, truly and eternally blessed, truly fulfilled, live like this. Live your life in a spirit of humility, of compassion, of doing right by other people, of prayerfulness, of generosity and an offering of your life”*.

John in his wonderful gospel does not describe this scene as such but he opens his gospel with words that could very well refer to this scene and its comparison with Moses and Mt Sinai.

Out of the fullness [of Christ] we have all received grace upon grace. For the law was given through Moses; grace and truth came by Jesus Christ.

Moses is the 'Law'-Giver.

Jesus is the 'Grace and Mercy and Truth and Life'-Giver.

And here at the start of this sermon on the mount, Jesus sets out not only the way he wants his followers to live out their lives but the qualities, attributes and attitudes he himself will display to the very end to the cross itself and beyond. The teacher will lead by example.

In these first public words given to us by Matthew, Jesus does not take his disciples (and us) through the creed, nor systematic theology (which we are doing some of next term!) but he takes them through a way of life, a set of attitudes.

That great Biblical commentator Matthew Henry wrote:

"The sermon given on the mountain is a practical discourse; there is not much of the creed of Christianity in it—the things to be believed, but it is wholly taken up with the things to be done. Christ began in his preaching, not to fill our heads with notions and doctrines, but to guide and regulate our practical living."

And so after a bit of journey in this talk, we reach:

Blessed are the merciful for they shall receive mercy.

And just so you know and can be reassured, we are not going to make it to "blessed are the pure in heart" today.

You know I think we are not quite sure what to make of the word 'mercy'. I think for us it has too much linkage with the judge giving sentence. 'The prisoner pleaded for mercy from the judge'. I.e. he wanted a more lenient sentence for whatever crime he had committed. I once took a funeral and I shared with the family the prayers I would be saying including one of the prayers of commendation at the end, one of which commends the person who has died to the 'mercy' of God. They asked me not to use the word 'mercy'. I think they felt it was a desperate plea as said by the person who is about to be executed in the Clint Eastwood Western I watched recently '*may God have mercy on your soul*'.

Many people mistakenly think that on the whole their better natures are stronger than their worse natures and so that in the scales of God's justice, they'll be fine. The story is told of the rather forbidding dowager rather like Maggie Smith in Downton Abbey, who was having her portrait painted. 'Young man', she said to the artist, 'I hope you are going to do me justice'. 'Madam' he replied 'it's not justice you need but mercy!'

Actually, every single one of us needs pardon and forgiveness from God and he longs to bless everyone with those gifts. We need a constant supply of generous faithful love and compassion that doesn't give up when we mess up.

But that sense of 'pardon' is only a very small part of the word or concept as used in scripture. Neither the Hebrew words used in the Old Testament nor the single Greek word used in the New Testament are mainly to do with being let off lightly.

No - 'Mercy' in scripture is a much broader, much deeper, much more expansive concept. There it means a rich combination of compassion, steadfast love, generosity and favour. The love that never gives up on someone. It is very close to the word 'grace.' A number of letters in the New Testament begin with this lovely greeting It's a greeting which we often use at the start of morning worship "Grace mercy and peace be with you" and you say "And also with you."

Here are a couple more instances where mercy is used in scripture:

Ephesians 2:4-5 - *God, who is rich in mercy, made us alive with Christ*

1 Peter 2:10 - *Once you were not a people, but now you are the people of God; once you had not received mercy, but now you have received mercy*

Hebrews 4:16 - *Let us then approach God's throne of grace with confidence, so that we may receive mercy and find grace to help us in our time of need.*

All these verses, and many others I could quote, refer to the many ways in which God has shown his mercy towards us: his generosity, his compassion, his steadfast love like that of the Prodigal Son's father who never ceased to love him. God who is rich in kindness. Once you had not know or received his steadfast love but now you have known and received it – and so on.

And of course it follows that if we have received this grace upon grace, this mercy upon peace, then this is how we are to live out our lives. *'Blessed are the merciful for they will receive mercy'*.

Mercy without limits. Mercy without borders.

One of the best illustrations of what Jesus meant by mercy is shown in the story of the Good Samaritan. I won't repeat it because you know it so well. But what you may not recall quite so well are the exchanges that come after Jesus has finished the story when Jesus turns the tables on the expert in the law who had asked him: *"who is my neighbour? Who is the one that I should love?"*

Now Jesus says to that man...

'Which of these three do you think was a neighbour to the man who fell into the hands of robbers?'

The expert in the law replied, *'The one who showed mercy on him.'* The words probably stuck in his throat saying them. But there we have it again. The expert in the law ran up against the expert in grace and mercy.

And how did our merciful man in the story show mercy? By stopping in the first place by a wounded man; by taking a risk; by being we might say overly generous; by putting this man's needs ahead of his own business and Priorities; by getting his hands dirty and his pockets emptied.

All things that we are called to do. And in the words that followed these eight Beatitudes Jesus gave plenty more challenging of examples of what it means to be merciful: walking the extra mile; giving the shirt off our back; turning the other cheek to the one who has just hit and hurt us. Not unlike what Joseph did – as we frequently heard in the series we have just finished.

It was Jesus' constant complaint against and criticism of the Pharisees, the scribes and the experts in the law that they could recite pages of not only the Old Testament but also all the Jewish commentaries and additional regulations that had built up over the centuries but they did not know what mercy was, what compassion was, what overlooking someone's faults was, what extending the hands of forgiveness to those who treated them badly or unfairly was.

In Matthew 23 Jesus says to them:

Matthew 23:23 - *Woe to you, teachers of the law and Pharisees, you hypocrites! You give a tenth of your spices – mint, dill and cumin. But you have neglected the more important matters of the law – justice, mercy and faithfulness.*

Oh, would that those zealous, ultra-orthodox settlers in Israel would sit down and reflect on the words of Jesus and the Old Testament prophets. And the same for those fanatical followers of Islam who would wipe Israel off the map. And for all those leaders and their supporters who have no problems in claiming to be faithful followers of religion whilst at the same time saying and doing things that are appalling.

Sadly it is an all too common pothole that religious people so often fall into. What you believe in your head or your holy day rituals are more important than how you live out your life.

“Is he a bible believing Christian?” (whatever that means) becomes the litmus test for whether someone is in the Christian ‘club’ or not in the ‘club’ rather than **“does he own the lordship of Christ in his life by acting justly, showing mercy and walking humbly before God, fully aware of his own poverty of spirit?”**

All too often, a narrow strictness about what is and is not sound doctrine, or a distorted sense of piety and holy living, or a misplaced desire to be untainted by the world, has meant that acts of mercy, of compassion, of generosity and of forgiveness have been lost or taken a backseat.

In his letter to us and to all Christians, the apostle James writes:

James 1:27 - Religion that God our Father accepts as pure and faultless is this: to look after orphans and widows in their distress and to keep oneself from being polluted by the world.

Those who consider themselves religious and yet do not keep a tight rein on their tongues deceive themselves, and their religion is worthless. As ever, the way we live our lives has to match up to what we believe in our heads; it has to be consistent with what we say and sing with our tongues in church. We have to walk the talk – the title of a sermon I gave earlier this year, so I am almost certainly repeating myself! And I had therefore better draw this to a conclusion.

We live in a world which thinks and acts very differently to the world of the Beatitudes. There is nothing new in this. The world has always said:

Blessed are the powerful

Blessed are those who get their own way

Blessed are those who live to serve their own interests only

Blessed are those who have a super abundance of this world’s goods

Blessed are those who look for excitement in drinking and feasting

Blessed are those who live only for the moment

Blessed are those who have found fame and celebrity in this world

Blessed are those with a million-squillion followers on Tik-Tok or Instagram

And look where that leads to. No - we must walk a different pathway. We must dance to a different tune. We follow not an influencer or a President or the founder of a billion-pound business. We follow and seek to walk in the footsteps of Jesus of Nazareth. Do you want to have a life full of grace, mercy and peace? Then practise daily demonstrating grace, mercy and peace to those around you. To those who it is easy to like and love and to those who it is not so easy to like and love. It is a virtuous circle. Live a life of mercy, of kindness, of generosity, of not giving up on people, of seeking to bless others and not condemn them and lo and behold we find those things coming back to us and in our inner lives we will have that peace and joy that neither the world, nor even death itself cannot take away.

Blessed and happy are the merciful for they shall obtain mercy grace and peace in this world and in the world to come. Amen.