

Sunday 26th June 2022
Matthew 5:1-12
Rev.Scott Burton
Brightons Parish Church

Sermon keypoints:

- Life is found in God's kingdom through Jesus
- Kingdom life is frightfully subversive
- Kingdom life is surprisingly foolish

Let us take a moment to pray before we think about God's word.

Come Holy Spirit and soften our hearts to the word of God.

Come Holy Spirit and lead us in the way of Jesus.

Come Holy Spirit with power and deep conviction, for we ask it in Jesus' name.

Amen.

Here's a question for you to have a little conversation with your neighbor about how long do you think the Church of Scotland has left. How long in years, not days? So, turn to a neighbor, holler across the room if you're a wee bit farther apart. How long has the Church of Scotland got left? Turn to anyone and have a chat for a few seconds.

So, did anyone go above 50 years? A couple people went about a couple above 50 okay.

How many were between 40 to 50. Those are many a couple.

30 to 40 years. 30 to 40.

20 to 30. 20 to 30.

Everybody else was under 20 then. What did you pick? Over 50, over 50.

Okay okay. We the elders and I had a Kirk Session meeting on Tuesday night and within the various conversations I shared with them an article that I had read quite recently which brought together some statistical information about the Church of Scotland saying that, if what we experience the decline we experience, continues at its current rate and things don't change there will be no more Church of Scotland by 2040. 18 years away! And that I can hear it. I can hear it 'Wow! No way! I would never have imagined!' But that is the case. And you can actually see it here just now this morning.

Okay, yes, we've had two services and most of our families have gone there but when you look around this room just now, the demographics in this room are the demographics I see in every other church where I preach or I talk and we think it 'Brightons, well we're doing fairly well.' and we think sometimes that's representative of the wider church but it's not, this is representative of the wider church and probably even too generous because many are not having so many as we do. And so, when I came to the passage today I'm really struck that in verse 1, crowds of people are coming to Jesus, crowds not a trickle, not a few people but crowds, that He saw multitudes come to Him, that the early church knew explosive growth and by the end of the third century the church and the Christian faith had literally turned the Roman empire upon its head. Why is that?

I'm sure there are many answers and if you're having a conversation after church then have a chat about that. Why is that? Why the difference? And I think one reason has got to be that Jesus and the early church had a message that was truly good news. It wasn't about coming to church; it wasn't about being religious. They shared something which was more than that actually, when you get into it, and we'll get into it this morning. When you look at their message it was frightfully subversive and it was surprisingly foolish, when you look at the teaching of Jesus in the church and yet people still came to faith. People still came to Jesus. People joined the church and as I say there was that explosive growth. So, maybe we're wondering 'Well, what did they teach? What was the message they shared?' and, in part, we're going to see that through the Sermon on the Mount. The sermon which captures the way of Jesus, the way He embodied and the way He called people who wanted to follow Him to live out and He begins it with The Beatitudes.

Now, I suspect we've probably heard a number of sermons over the years about The Beatitudes. We've probably read it in our own devotions and I wonder what emotions has raised up within you. So, again, we're doing a wee bit interaction over the summer, why don't you turn to a neighbor and say what's your emotional reaction to this, what's your emotional reaction to The Beatitudes. So, 15 20 seconds over to you, what's your emotional reaction to The Beatitudes.

So, again, feel free to carry that conversation on. I heard words like 'challenging' and bits and pieces but I wonder if any of us ever felt a bit confused. I have. Have you ever felt a wee bit despondent when you've read these, because you end up seeing it as a benchmark. Have you ever felt pain as you've read them? Lesser than them those who mourn. Really, I'm blessed when I mourn? And it seems to belittle your pain and your hardship. Is that really what Jesus is getting? Is that really His good news? Because He uses nine times the word 'blessed' and it's quite a hard word to try to translate and to explain partly because it's usage across the scriptures and its uses in other ways draws upon many different ideas like wholeness, and well-being and joy. If we were using a Hebrew word we would probably most likely use the word 'shalom', that holistic peace that the scriptures speak of, that covers every aspect of life. So, maybe, there's a way of putting this across that will help us. Some of the translators the commentators put it this way 'Who has the good life? Who has the good life?' If you're blessed you have the good life. Who has it? Who's in, who's out? How can I enter into that good life? The good life is known by this group of people, that group of people.

And so, before we even get into The Beatitudes, we need to understand a wider context for what Jesus is trying to say here because, what He gets to here in the Sermon on the mount, in The Beatitudes, comes after He's already said and been doing something. We could read earlier if we go back into Matthew these words 'From that time on Jesus began to preach. 'Repent for the kingdom of heaven has come near.' Jesus went throughout Galilee teaching in their synagogues, proclaiming the good news of the kingdom and healing every disease and illness among the people.' If you're to summarize the teaching, the message of Jesus, it's ultimately about the kingdom. That is the good news. So, whatever Jesus is teaching here about in the sermon on the

Mount and in The Beatitudes has got to be about the kingdom because that is His core message. And so, the good life, that's what blessed means, the good life is known by people who know the kingdom, who share in the kingdom of God and, as the text here in verse 23 makes clear, as Jesus teaches and as He ministers, through Him people are experiencing the kingdom, the experience in the power, the hope, the freedom, the comfort, the joy, the good news of the kingdom through Jesus. And, bringing all that together means that 'Life (the good life) is found in God's kingdom through Jesus'.

Life is found in God's kingdom through Jesus.

Do you know that? Have you experienced that? Are you convinced of that yourself?

What does your faith mean to you? Is it only confined to the four walls of the church, to the ongoing running of an institution? If that institution, if this building was no more, would your faith be no more? Or is your faith tied to something greater and bigger, more eternal? Is it tied to the kingdom?

One of our earlier songs spoke about having a foretaste of heaven. Can you say that, in the depths of your being you have tasted a foretaste of heaven? You don't know the fullness of heaven yet, obviously, but you have a foretaste because the kingdom has broken into our lives. Do you know that? Have you shared in that?

If you have, is there a desire in you to make that known at all, to share that with others? Because we'll never see past 2040 if we're not sharing it and if you don't know it or if that conviction, if that hope in you has waned a little. Maybe, maybe the invitation today from God is to press in, is to know more, to know that there is good news, there is life through Jesus in the kingdom of God.

So, Jesus is talking about the good life, about the blessed life and that fundamentally it's tied into God's kingdom through Jesus. But He goes on to give us these Beatitudes about the who and the what of life and, as He shares this, to my mind, there's two parts to them and each part is pushing against the prevailing assumptions of Jesus day in two particular areas of life.

And so, in verses three to four it feels like He is pushing against a religious perspective because, if we're trying to answer who has the good life, the religious perspective, the religious teachers of the day, the Pharisees, the Sadducees, the really knowledgeable folks, they would say 'Well, the good life is known by who?' Them. The godly. The very religious and that would exclude the vast majority of people, not them, but the vast majority of people because they're just not good enough. And so, when Jesus comes ministering, what do we see their reaction? 'Why are you messing around with these people, who are a bunch of sinners and drunkards? Why are you messing around with the prostitutes? Why are you messing around with the tax collectors?' They just cannot get their head around it because He's embodying something different, something that goes against their assumptions. And so, when He says 'Blessed are the poor in spirit' and 'Blessed are those who mourn' He's pushing against their assumptions. And that

might be a surprise to you because often, we read these words and we think 'Poor in spirit? I need to be poor in spirit. That's a benchmark I need to get to. I need to know how terrible a person I am if I'm to walk into the fullness of God's kingdom.' Or some such idea or that 'I need to mourn somehow to be worthy of the kingdom and to know God's nearness and comfort.' We end up twisting it so badly, but that's not what Jesus is saying. He's not saying that you have to be good enough to earn it or you have to have these conditions to earn the kingdom because poor in spirit is those who are sinful, it's those who mess up in life, it is those who would be 'spiritual zeros' we might say, religiously, spiritually. And those who mourn - well do you remember that story where Jesus has this man who's been blind from birth come before and the disciples say 'Well Jesus, who sinned? Was it the man or was it his parents?' because the prevailing thought of the day was 'Well, if you know any difficulty, know hardship, if you know illness and sickness and sorrow then it's your fault. You've sinned in some way and you're under God's judgment' and obviously in that passage Jesus puts them right. And so, when he says 'Blessed are those who mourn' He's speaking into that assumption that you're excluded, that somehow you are, you're not worthy, you're not good enough, you're not in, you're not going to share that good life because clearly, if you've got hardship in your life, then you've messed up your life and you're never going to be part of God's kingdom.

And I'm sure we all know people who think the same in our community and our families. We know people whose lives are really broken, they might not be tax collectors, though they might be we might think of certain things about them, or they might not be prostitutes, but they might be, they might be broken, addicted, they might be just struggling with so much, they might be people who you think is the worst person you know in the world and they're at work with you day in day out, and you hate working with them or that neighbor who really grates on you and you just wish they would move, it might be someone who has hurt you so deeply, it might be someone that just grates on you and you want nothing to do to them and they might be sitting here in this building with you.

And Jesus would say 'Blessed are they, for the door is open' and if the door is open to them, the door is open to you and to me. The radical love of God has opened the door wide for us, brothers and sisters, for you and for me, and we take that for granted a little because we've grown up in church and it's old news, but I'm trying to get us back to that fresh taste of it, that would have been the case in Jesus day, where this was not the knowledge, not the case, and it's not the case for people in our communities. Sometimes we know people that would say to us 'God would want nothing to do with me. Look how messed up my life is.' or 'I can never go to church and be like them.' or 'I'll go to church when I've got life together a bit more.' The good news of the kingdom is that it is frightfully subversive because it turn up, turns our lives, it upturns our ideas about the kingdom and the window of an invitation and it should thrill us and delight us and we should literally be raising the roof off the ceiling and jumping for joy such is the love of God. But we yawn and we get tired and we just 'Oh, here we go. God's love again.' Yes, God's love again because it's a radical love and it upturns. it has upturned history. We get that. Do we get that? Do we live that?

But then Jesus goes on. He goes on to challenge another set of assumptions in the next verses 5 to 12. And these verses are not so much tied to the religious system as they are tied to more like a kind of worldly system and let's remember at the time, like this picture is trying to jog our memories, it's the power of Rome, it's the power of empire, it's where power and dominance and war are the means to the good life and that, if you want that good life, you've got to buy into that system of values and the way of doing life in that time. And Jesus is again pushing against that system, that worldview, that prevailing assumption, because He says 'Blessed are the meek.' Like, can you imagine seeing that in the time of Rome, where Roman power holds your life in the grip of its hand and Jesus says 'Blessed are the meek.' really Jesus? 'Blessed are those who hunger and thirst for righteousness' who want to live a Godly life. 'Blessed are those who are merciful' and mercy has that idea drawn from the Old Testament where we enter into the suffering of others just as God entered into the suffering of His people. Really? Can you imagine a Roman citizen saying yes to that? That is how you get to the good life. Blessed are those who are pure, who have unmixed motives, who have God first as their master. Blessed are those who are peacemakers, not just seeking reconciliation between people but that they seek the highest good of others. A world dominating power like Rome does not seek the good of others and we know what that looks like just now in our news. Imagine saying that to Putin right now 'Seek the highest good of Ukraine.'?. Can you imagine I'm taking that on board? Well, imagine a whole country, a whole citizenship, a whole empire, who thinks that the good life is not earned that way but is earned by war and conquest and Rome's way being the way for everyone.

What do you think people would make of that?

I think they would be surprised that He's teaching that. I think they would think it was foolish, absolutely foolish teaching because everyone knows that's not the way to the good life. There's no way that you are going to be counted amongst the blessed if that's the way that you pursue. And isn't it the case that it's still a predominant thinking today in our culture, in our times, in our land, in our system of values.

Let me read a paraphrase that I brought together of The Beatitudes based upon something I found in one of the commentaries:

Jesus says 'Blessed are the meek'

but we say 'Blessed are the powerful for then they can get ahead of others to secure the good life for themselves.

Jesus says 'Blessed are those who hunger and thirst for righteousness'

but we say 'Blessed are the unrestrained and the uninhabited for then they can savor every pleasure imagined by man or devil.

Jesus says 'Blessed are the merciful'

but we say 'Blessed are those who look after number one because we don't have time for the suffering of others.

Jesus says 'Blessed are the pure in heart' but we say 'Blessed are the wealthy and, as such, we and our bank balances are our God and they must be satisfied.'

Jesus says 'Blessed are the peacemakers'

but we say 'Blessed are those who do what suits them and defend their interests first.'

Jesus says 'Blessed are those who are persecuted for righteousness'

but we say 'Blessed are the expedient and those who are realistic because pursuing what is right is just too hard and doesn't come quickly enough.'

Jesus said we are 'Blessed when persecuted for His sake'

but we say 'Blessed are those who go with the flow, are worldly-wise a person of the times, for them the world is their oyster and friend, and the idea of following Jesus to the end against the pressures of the masses is simply too inconvenient.'

Brothers and sisters, Jesus invites us into His kingdom to know life, to walk in a different way, a way that is frightfully subversive, because it turns our world upside down, but it is surprisingly foolish at the same time, it looks crazy on the outside. And to be able to walk in that way we need to know the first part of The Beatitudes for ourselves.

There is a relationship between the two parts because there's no way we can walk in Jesus' way, his foolish, radical way without knowing first of all, the love of God for ourselves. There is no way that you can pursue mercy and enter into the suffering of others and keep doing so when you don't know God's mercy and love for yourself. You need to know the radical, available, welcoming love of God, not just as an idea, not just as a nice wee Sunday School thought, but as a reality, as a conviction, as something in the depths of your being that drives you, that is your ground, your stay for all of life come what may.

And so, do you know that friends? Do you overflow with that confidence and with that love and with that knowledge of who you are in Christ? Or has the love of God gone cold in your hearts? do you think it's just old news?

If that's the case, whatever side you're in, whether it's cold or whether you burn with passion, there is more to know, there is more to know. You can know more of the love of God not just as an idea but in the depths of your soul, and I think it begins with prayer. If you go into Ephesians chapter 3 Paul says that he prays for the Spirit to come so that the people there, the church there, will have power to know the length and breadth and height and depth of law of God and to know it in a way that is beyond knowledge, that is in the depths of their being, and I encourage you this summer to press in, to know more to seek God in prayer, that you might overflow with that love and be able to live in that way, the way of Jesus, the way of his kingdom. And you know, maybe then, maybe then we will see churches grow rather than decline. Maybe then it will be many more than 18 years before the last door of the Church of Scotland closes. Maybe then we'll see a little or maybe even more than what Jesus and the early church saw.

I pray for that future. I pray for you to know that love. I pray for me to know that love to the depths of our being. May it be so. Amen.