

Fourth Sunday after Epiphany, Year A

Micah 6:1-8, 1 Corinthians 1:18-31, Matthew 5:1-12

PRAYER

Last Sunday, in our gospel reading, we heard the beginning of Jesus's public ministry with "*Repent, for the kingdom of heaven has come near*" and then continuing with him teaching and healing, *proclaiming the good news of the kingdom*.

This morning we begin some of that teaching with an introductory passage to the Sermon on the Mount. You may have heard it said of the Sermon on the Mount "Never mind being a Christian, if only people did what it says, the world would be a whole lot better place". And maybe so.

But to take the Sermon on the Mount as mere moral guidance is to miss the point. Because the Sermon, and particularly today's passage, is about the *kingdom of heaven*, or the *kingdom of God* as the other gospel writers put it. The two are synonymous.

So what is the *kingdom of heaven* or the *kingdom of God*? What do we understand by it?

If we talk about the United Kingdom we are talking about a defined geographical area with its own King, although King Charles is not the de facto ruler. The kingdom of God is different. There is no defined physical territory – at least not until the Lord establishes the new heaven and the new earth – and its King **is** the de facto ruler.

The kingdom of God is anywhere where God's reign impacts life. As Jesus said (Luke 17:21 NLT) "*You won't be able to say, 'Here it is!' or 'It's over there!' For the Kingdom of God is already among you.*"

And it is this kingdom that Jesus has in mind when he says *the kingdom of heaven has come near*. This is the kingdom we are called to take ownership of. This is the kingdom into which we enter through the *narrow gate* (Matthew 7:13). This is the kingdom for which we pray in the Lord's Prayer "*your kingdom come*". We are not just praying for the advent of the new heaven and

the new earth; we are praying that God's rule will invade earth and invade our lives now.

This thought of entry into, or personal ownership of, the kingdom of God, brackets the Beatitudes we heard this morning. The first one in verse 3 says:

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

And the last, in verse 10:

Blessed are those who are persecuted because of righteousness, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven.

The Beatitudes are about belonging to the Kingdom of Heaven.

Why do we call them Beatitudes? You probably know this: it comes from the Latin translation, *beatus*, for the word *blessed*. The Good News Bible renders *blessed* happy. But, while we might be happy to be blessed by God, the Greek word *makarios* implies a whole lot more and is, I understand, difficult to convey properly in English. We can bless God and bless one another, and I understand that fundamentally *makarios* has connotations of approval.

So if Jesus is saying that we have God's approval by being poor, mournful, meek, hungry etc. doesn't that give us a shopping list, as it were, of things that we should pursue? Well, yes, I think it does. But not in the sense of making poverty and hunger our goals. The goal is the kingdom of heaven.

The poor and destitute do not automatically enter the kingdom of God; but there is enough in the bible to show that they have a very special place in the heart of God.

These Beatitudes, makarisms as some call them, line up with our reading in 1 Corinthians:

Not many of you were wise by human standards; not many were influential; not many were of noble birth. 27 But God chose the foolish things of the world to shame the wise; God chose the weak things of the world to shame the strong. 28 God chose the lowly things of this world and the despised things.

The Kingdom of God is an upside-down kingdom. It is not the natural habitat for the wealthy, the arrogant and the self-satisfied. Think of Jesus's parable in

Luke (18:9-14) about the two men praying in the temple, *told, we read, to some who had great confidence in their own righteousness and scorned everyone else.* But it was the tax collector who was aware of being a sinner who was the one approved by God, not the self-righteous Pharisee.

And that upside-down aspect of the kingdom should give many of us pause to think.

Because we **are** wealthy by the world's standard, some of us have degrees, some are influential. All of us could, and maybe do, get on quite happily in life without seeking the kingdom of God. Wealth, wisdom and influence are not, of course, bad in themselves. But they are not qualifications for entry into a kingdom where God chooses the foolish, the weak and the lowly *so that no one may boast before him.*

Which brings us back to these makarisms in Matthew. The kingdom of heaven is the province of the *poor in spirit.* What does that mean? I think that it can mean being aware of our own natural spiritual inadequacy. We don't naturally qualify for the kingdom of heaven.

And the commentators link it with being lowly as in Isaiah 66:2 "*I will bless those who have humble and contrite hearts,*" which in turn is reflected in our Old Testament reading in Micah (6:8): *What does the LORD require of you? To act justly and to love mercy and to walk humbly with your God.*

It is too easy to take pride in our own character, our own achievements. But God is looking for humility. It is the humble who walk with God in his kingdom.

Now I don't have time in a ten-minute sermon to go through each of these makarisms individually although I am happy to discuss them over coffee later. So I'm going to pull out just two more, both reflected in our other readings.

First mercy, which occurs in Micah. *Blessed are the merciful, for they will be shown mercy.*

Does this mean that God will show mercy only to those who show mercy to others, like forgiveness? Well, yes, to some extent. Because mercy is different from grace, God's undeserved favour. Mercy is compassion for the wretched and the helpless. And if we are like the Pharisee in Jesus's parable, self-centred and looking down on those in misery we shall likely be unaware of our own wretchedness and our need to obtain or receive mercy from God.

When someone rubs us up the wrong way, do we ever consider that they might do so because they are in misery in some way, make allowance and show mercy? Because Father wants mercy to be a priority.

Second righteousness, mentioned in Corinthians. *Blessed are those who hunger and thirst for righteousness.*

What is righteousness? It is more than being a good person, a law-abiding citizen. It is about being holy as God is holy – an impossibly tall order. No wonder we have to hunger and thirst after it. It takes intentional effort. But, at the same time, it is easy. It takes no effort at all to achieve it. It is as we read God's words in Isaiah 55:1

'Come, all you who are thirsty, come to the waters; and you who have no money, come, buy and eat! Come, buy wine and milk without money and without cost.

Because **Jesus** is *our righteousness*, as Paul writes to the Corinthians. It is a gift; it is free. If we are *in Christ*, united with him, then we are righteous, with his righteousness and holiness. It is only in Jesus that we can hope to fully fulfil the injunction in Micah *to act justly and to love mercy and to walk humbly with our God.*

'Let the one who boasts boast in the Lord' writes Paul. Don't be like the Pharisee in the parable, boasting in his own goodness. Be blessed through relationship with Jesus, boast in his righteousness and inherit the kingdom of heaven, not just in the future, but now. Amen

Chris Shaw, 29 January 2023