

All Saints Sunday Sermon, November 5, 2017. Matthew 5. 1-12, The Beatitudes.

All Saints Sunday, the day we celebrate the Saints of the Church—the known and unknown saints. We know of many of the official saints. I thought you might like some information about the Anglican view of Saints, and All Saints Day, so made up that little handout for you.

So who are the ‘unknown’ saints? Well, according to St. Paul—an Saint well known, saints are those who devote their lives to Christ. From 1<sup>st</sup> Corinthians:

“To the church of God that is in Corinth, to those who are sanctified in Christ Jesus, called to be **saints**, together with all those who in every place call on the name of our Lord Jesus Christ, both their Lord and ours:” [1 Corinthians 1:2]

Throughout the New Testament are multiple references to the followers of the early church as saints. These were times when being a Christian was most definitely a difficult one. After all, Christianity’s leader was killed by the occupying Roman government as a political criminal, an insurrectionist. And this capital punishment was sanctioned by the Jewish leadership. To openly declare yourself a Christian and actually follow the ways of our Lord was to knowingly open yourself up to being persecuted. Christianity was far from main-stream.

In our gospel reading for today from the fifth chapter of Matthew, we have an excerpt from what has come to be known as the Sermon on the Mount, and I read the section called “The Beatitudes”. By this time, as Matthew presents his story of Jesus’ life and ministry, Jesus’ ministry is just nicely underway, he’s done some healing and teaching, and is making an impact, he’s gathering an audience and crowds are coming to hear him. So Matthew has Jesus preaching on the mountain, very Moses-like — and this is Jesus’ inaugural big time sermon. According to biblical scholars, all these sayings were most likely not presented by Jesus in this particular way, and this sermon is more of a compilation of Jesus’ sayings which Matthew put together like this for the Christians in his community. Luke presents this sermon differently. In Luke’s version, Jesus is on the plain, not a mountain, and Luke doesn’t have as many of these ‘beatitudes’ as Matthew lists. Now, this is a very good time for us 21<sup>st</sup> century readers of the gospels to remember that they were not written to be a historical biography of Jesus’ life, as much as we today might wish they were! They were written as a way to record and share Jesus’ teachings with new and developing Christian communities in the first decades after Jesus’ death. If you recall from our reading of Matthews gospel this year, the importance of the Kingdom of Heaven for Matthew is paramount-- what the kingdom of heaven is like, and what is required by Jesus’ followers to be citizen of Heaven’s Kingdom. And understandably, considering Matthew’s readership; who were mostly from the Jewish community, and living in a time of extreme aggression--actual persecution towards them. They were ostracized, punished, jailed and worse—it was a very violent time. Heaven’s kingdom may well have been preferable to what they were experiencing in their daily lives, trying to be true followers of the ways and teachings of Jesus each and every day, in a Jewish Community and under Roman rule. It would have been a very, very difficult way of life.

So even knowing all that background information helps put the Beatitudes in context, but still, I’ve always had problems understanding them. I remember being introduced to them as a child, and I recall even then I found them overwhelming, if not a bit appalling. I never seemed to get a sensible understanding of them, besides something to the effect of this is how real good Christians behave—like the Saints did. These were the virtues of the Saints. And most of the saints that I learned about died in very violent and frightening ways, and not something to which I wanted much to do with, never mind aspire to! And that’s kind of stuck with me. Amazing sometimes, isn’t it, how what we learned about religion and faith in childhood stays with us, unless we choose to learn and grow beyond that. And some things we learned as kids, we need to mature beyond.

Beatitude, not sure I even liked the word. Looking at it literally, ‘be’ and ‘attitude’, I always thought that it meant to be saint-like meant to be in the saintly attitude of these sayings, which is maybe bit too literal, but well... And so I always kind of dismissed them, because they felt so negative, so unattainable, so far beyond me. I’d never make sainthood—even one of the unknown saints! So, trying to be more adult about this, I figured it’s time for a mature understanding, so some research was in order. I have a dictionary that describes these beatitudes as “qualities of Christian perfection”.<sup>1</sup> And a commentator I read noted that Jesus is describing the kingdom of heaven and the character of citizenship of this kingdom; a disposition, (or a way of looking) toward(s) God or a fellow human being.<sup>2</sup> So far, this didn’t help much.

The word ‘beatitude’, as it turns out has nothing to do ‘being in an attitude’! Beatitude is an old word that comes from the Latin *beatus* meaning ‘happy or fortunate’<sup>3</sup>. And it’s a Latin translation of the Greek word which means blessed, which is also translated to ‘happy’ sometimes in other places in the bible, depending on the context. Another bible commentary suggested the word ‘satisfied’ as an alternate translation. And if you read these beatitudes in some translations, instead of blessing, the word happy is used. ‘Happy’ are those who mourn? Or ‘satisfied’ are those who are persecuted. Really? I have yet to meet anyone who is happy to mourn, or is happy to be persecuted or to feel poor in spirit—and I’m not sure just what that means to be poor in spirit, but it doesn’t sound like something I’d aspire to be like, and makes me wonder about the attitude in the kingdom of heaven even. This doesn’t even sound like Jesus to me. I’m obviously missing something.

I wonder if it’s the way they’re written, like couplets in a poem. I suspect that also makes them harder to understand. (please look them up in your bible, Matthew 5: 1-12)

Blessed are ... various dispositions... for they will ... receive some manifestation of God.

We need to go back to the word ‘blessed’, and maybe even another translation of these verses.

In my understanding and training, to be blessed by God means to have God’s presence upon you and with you. Blessings can be conferred upon people, the history of asking God’s blessing upon us is as old as the Bible! We Anglicans have blessing prayers for many things -- the waters of baptism, or the bread and wine of communion and of course, each other. As a priest, conferring God’s blessing is one of the most sacred things I do, and I feel well and truly blessed, humbled and honoured to have been ordained to do so. And Anglicans have litanies for blessing our pets, farm animals, the land, even our houses. Blessing is the way God’s people ask for God’s presence to be upon something or someone that is important or special to them.

Ok, so let’s look at these virtues, these beatitudes in this way then.

We ask for God’s blessings, God’s presence upon us when we are feeling poor spiritually, like God’s missing from our lives, because God’s Kingdom is especially for the people who are down and out. That most certainly is what Jesus taught, it was his ministry, it is where Jesus spent his life, with the down trodden and oppressed, the spiritually poor.

We ask God’s blessings, God’s presence upon us when we are mourning the loss of a loved one, and God will bring us comfort and wrap us in God’s love.

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<sup>1</sup> Concise Oxford Dictionary of the Christian Church

<sup>2</sup> Patrick Gray in Exegetical Perspective for Matthew 5: 1-12 in Feasting on the Word, Feasting on the Word, Year A Vol. 4 p. 239

<sup>3</sup> ibid

God's presence is with those who are humble; those hungering and searching for justice, in their communities, in the world, working to bring God's kingdom here on earth, and God will fill those who are searching with God's strength and love in their pursuit of justice.

God's blessing is on those who show mercy to others, and God will fill them with God's mercy.

God is with those who work for peace, and they will be called God's children of peace.

Those who are persecuted, who are mocked, and lied to for doing the right things, for following Jesus' way, well, God's presence is especially with them, because they are working towards bringing the ways of God's kingdom, and are a part of God's Kingdom.

In the midst of all the challenges that life throws us, it can be difficult to live one's life dedicated to living how Jesus directed, how Jesus commanded, because Jesus' way often contradict the way society tells us we are to live and believe. To live the ways of Jesus' teachings is to be one of the saints.

Saints known, and unknown—doing God's work, some right here in this community, in this church.

God's presence is with us.

And in that we truly are blessed, and because God's presence restores us, strengthens us, leads us and provides for us, that is when we are truly blessed. And even in the midst of adversity, pain, sorrow and strife, we can be happy, because God's presence is with us. And that is when we are well and truly blessed.

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