

Reflection for All Saints' Day

For centuries, what we call the Beatitudes have been read as the Gospel on All Saints' Day. Here, Jesus begins his 'Sermon on the Mount'. Jesus has gone through the waters of the River Jordan at his baptism, and was then driven into the wilderness to be tested. Now he ascends a mountain and teaches. Matthew's Gospel was, of course, written principally for Jewish hearers. This sequence – water – wilderness – mountain – teaching – unmistakably recalls the story of Moses who led the Israelites through the waters of the Red Sea and into the wilderness wanderings and who received God's Law on Mount Sinai. So, Jesus is the 'New Moses'. He ascends a mountain and delivers the new Law. In him, we can find ultimate salvation and deliverance – Jesus brings us into the promised land, the life of the Kingdom of God.

God's Kingdom is his rule on earth, and the Beatitudes are a remarkable expression of what Kingdom-life looks like. The word 'Beatitude' is derived from our English word *blest*. But its origins are in the Old Testament where *blest* means literally 'Oh, the happiness of'. So, Psalm 1 begins:

'How happy or blest are those who have not walked in the counsel of the wicked, nor lingered in the way of sinners, nor sat in the assembly of the scornful, but their delight is in the Law of the Lord.'

Psalm 32 begins – 'How happy are those whose transgressions are forgiven and whose sin is covered.' Here is the secret of true happiness.

But look at the beatitudes – they show the upside-down values of God's Kingdom.

Happy are the poor in spirit – not the rich and powerful, the arrogant and oppressive. Why are they happy? Because the kingdom of heaven belongs to them.

Happy are those who mourn – now there's a paradox – not those who brag and give themselves to hedonism and self-gratification – it is the mourners who will find true consolation and comfort.

Happy are the meek – the humble, not the boasters, self-promoters and self-publicists, because the meek will inherit the earth.

Happy are those who hunger and thirst for righteousness – not the ones who collude with corruption, inequality and injustice – it is those who hunger for righteousness who will be satisfied.

Happy are the merciful, not the revengeful and those who retaliate and exact retribution, for the merciful will receive ultimate mercy.

Happy are the pure in heart – not the depraved or perverted or base – only the pure in heart will see God.

Happy are the peacemakers – not the warmongers, the violent, the cruel, the heartless; it is the peacemakers who will be called children of God.

Happy are those who are persecuted for righteousness' sake – not the ones who pass by on the other side or who take the easy way out or simply remain silent – to the persecuted will be given the kingdom of heaven.

Of course, it is Jesus himself who exemplifies all these beatitudes; in Jesus we see true happiness – his life is a life of rich-poverty, godly sorrow, and generosity; his life was characterised by a passion for truth and justice, mercy, purity, and peace; and, of course, deepest suffering for the sake of truth.

And today's feast celebrates men and women who have closely followed in his steps; the heroines and heroes of our faith, and countless millions of unknown souls in whom his light has shone with particular quality.

Today we rejoice in their inheritance – to them belongs the Kingdom of heaven; to them the earth will be given when God's reign is perfected. They now know and enjoy ultimate consolation, boundless mercy, all their hungers and thirsts are now satisfied.

But we are called to imitate both Jesus, and those who have gone before. As our collect asks – we pray for grace to

'follow God's blessed saints in all virtuous and godly living'.

We are called to anticipate now the happiness of the age to come, even if that means the hard and costly path of discipleship. But it is the secret of true happiness on earth. And this happiness on earth anticipates the perfect bliss of heaven – so we follow God's saints in all virtuous and godly living -

'that we may come to those inexpressible joys that you have prepared for those who truly love you.' Amen.

