

Year A

Matthew 5:1-12

At age 16 Andor Foldes was already a skilled pianist, but he was experiencing a troubled year. In the midst of the young Hungarian's personal struggles, one of the most renowned pianists of the day came to Budapest. Emil von Sauer was famous not only for his abilities; he was also the last surviving pupil of the great Franz Liszt. Von Sauer requested that Foldes play for him. Foldes obliged with some of the most difficult works of Bach, Beethoven, and Schumann.

When he finished, von Sauer walked over to him and kissed him on the forehead. "My son," he said, "when I was your age I became a student of Liszt. He kissed me on the forehead after my first lesson, saying, 'Take good care of this kiss--it comes from Beethoven, who gave it to me after hearing me play.' I have waited for years to pass on this sacred heritage, but now I feel you deserve it."

After reading the first, most well-known, section of the Sermon on the Mount; the Beatitudes, we might feel like Foldes who was waiting for that kiss of inspiration. The

Beatitudes seem so aspirational and maybe therefore so remote from our daily experience. We long to receive all these blessings but we struggle to attain to the graces that go with them and so we think that the Beatitudes must be just for the elite Christians or either it's all about the future when this world is changed with the coming of Christ again. Both views are wrong. Jesus had already come on the scene when he announced these things as integral to his mission now and he made no mention of deferment. Also he was addressing the ordinary disciples not the religious elite of

the day. So we need to read these sayings in a different way. Here we have God's preference detailed in contradiction to the preference of the world. Our world does not value poverty of spirit. It does not value humility, mercy or peace. It has no interests in bearing grief. But all of these things are the mark of a life lived for Christ. Here are God's kingdom preferences for this world and so we need to take them seriously.

There is probably a sermon in each Beatitude and as we're with this text only for one Sunday it would be impossible to look at each Beatitude in turn. Instead I would like

us to take a step back and to try to see the big picture. What do we have here in principle?

It is important that we don't ignore the fact that Jesus went up a mountain. In the earlier chapters of Matthew's Gospel we have read of the slaughter of the infants, the return from exile of our hero, Jesus, the passing through water and the temptation in the wilderness and here we go up the mountain where God's word is shared. In the book of Exodus, we read of the slaughter of the infants, the return from exile of our hero, Moses, the passing through water and

the temptation of the people in the wilderness and Moses' ascent up the mountain to receive the word of God in the shape of the ten commandments. It is Matthew's intention that we see the parallels and therefore understand Jesus as a type of new Moses. As the ten commandments represented a simple compression of God's law so here Jesus in the sharing of the Beatitudes gave God's rule for Christians in miniature. There is no great complexity or sophistication in either. Here we have plain speaking and a striking simplicity. Maybe we so often struggle to deal with the

Beatitudes because their simplicity makes us feel uncomfortable. We know to what they are referring and we know how we struggle to live this way. Here is the rule of God in Christ brought to us, encompassing the ten commandments; the rule by which the people of Israel were to live out their freedom from captivity in Egypt, and detailing how we are to live out our freedom from the ways of this world. So a simplicity of words, matching that of Moses, is presented to us by Jesus.

But there's another Old Testament background that's equally important and

apparent in the Matthew text. The beatitudes are closely linked to the prophecy of Isaiah recorded in chapter 61. There we find a proclamation of good news to the poor; of the comforting of those who mourn; of the healing of the broken-hearted and the importance of righteousness. And all of this in Isaiah is explicitly shared in the context of hopefulness.

There was once an optimistic farmer who couldn't wait to greet each new day with a resounding, "Good morning, God!" He lived near a woman whose morning greeting was more like, "Good God... morning?" They were

each a trial to the other. Where he saw opportunity, she saw problems. Where he was satisfied, she was discontented.

One bright morning he exclaimed, “Look at the beautiful sky! Did you see that glorious sunrise?”

“Yeah,” she countered. “It’ll probably get so hot the crops will scorch!”

During an afternoon shower, he commented, “Isn’t this wonderful? Mother Nature is giving the corn a drink today!”

“And if it doesn’t stop before too long,” came the sour reply, “we’ll wish we’d taken out flood insurance on the crops!”

Convinced that he could instil some awe and wonder in her hardened attitude, he bought a remarkable dog. Not just any mutt, but the most expensive, highly-trained and gifted dog he could find. The animal was exquisite! It could perform remarkable and impossible feats which, the farmer thought, would surely amaze even his neighbour. So he invited her to watch his dog perform.

“Fetch!” he commanded, as he tossed a stick out into a lake, where it bobbed up and down in the rippling water. The dog bounded after the stick, walked on the water, and retrieved it.

“What do you think of that?” he asked, smiling.

“Not much of a dog” she frowned. “Can’t even swim, can he?”

Our attitude, whether good or bad, will determine how we live our lives. The people of Israel, by the time Isaiah was speaking, were caught up in a terrible, pessimistic cynicism. They were merely surviving when they should have been living with hope. Isaiah challenged them to refuse to conform to what they saw around themselves and to change their attitude. Jesus does likewise in the Beatitudes. The cynicism of our age

must be challenged by kingdom living. The way we live will reveal what we believe. The Beatitudes are all about life lived to God's beat; to his priorities and concerns.

The final background which should help us to understand the Beatitudes is closer to Jesus' time because it's Jesus himself. When Jesus addressed the synagogue in Nazareth he said; "the Spirit of the Lord God is upon me, because he has anointed me to preach good news to the poor."¹ He was quoting Isaiah 61 whose significance we have reflected on already. But the point here is

¹ Luke 4:18

that he is the one who is anointed. As significant as Moses and the prophet Isaiah would have been for the people of Israel in the past, now we have the one who is able to go further and bring God's ways to fruition. The compassion of Jesus will ensure that his words are not merely a marker to judge performance but are the ways in which we can actually live for God. Here we have one who is not merely sympathising with us; willing to walk alongside us, but one who is walking in our shoes.

A little girl was late coming home for tea. Her mother made the expected irate parent's demand to know where she had been.

The little girl replied that she had stopped to help Jane, whose bicycle was broken in a fall.

"But you don't know anything about fixing bicycles," her mother responded.

"I know that," the girl said. "I just stopped to help her cry."

If the Beatitudes do not reach beyond the words on a page to us as people that we might live them, then they are of no use. We can read about what that looks like in the

pages of the Old Testament. But the encouragement today is that we have a Saviour who has lived these words for us and who calls us in the power of his Spirit to live them to. Let's do that together.