Sermon Christ Church Cathedral 29th January 2023

What does the Lord require of you but to do justice, and to love kindness, and to walk humbly with your God?

Well known, much loved and often quoted words from the prophet, Micah, which we heard at the end of our first reading today.

Micah had much to say about the corruption of the wealthy who were oppressing the poor and he was the first prophet to predict the downfall of Jerusalem, which according to him, was doomed because its beautification was financed by dishonest business practices which impoverished the city's citizens. Micah lived in a rural area, and often rebuked the corruption of city life in Israel and Judah. He was more than likely descended from the common people as the target of his message was towards the privileged classes.

Fast forward 700 years or so and we hear Jesus beginning his glorious Sermon on the Mount with the famous Beatitudes and we are left in no doubt where the poor and the oppressed come in the pecking order of the Kingdom of God.

The poor in spirit…. the mourning…. the meek…..the hungry….the persecuted. It’s all a far cry from the execution of the letter of the Law by the religious leaders of the day, or the quest for riches by the upper classes or the quest for wisdom by the Greeks. By and large, Jesus is talking to the lower reaches of society who were clamouring around him; simple country people whose lives were hard and who would likely have considered themselves more cursed than blessed.

But Jesus, in expanding his teaching on the kingdom of heaven which he had proclaimed as being ‘at hand’ at the very start of his teaching just a short while previously, was elevating their status above those whom the world would have considered blessed-

one of the first examples of how kingdom values turn the values of the world upside-down.

Some modern translations of the Beatitudes use the word ‘happy’ in place of the word ‘blessed’. The original Greek word used has a range of meanings that includes fortunate, happy, privileged. Happiness and blessedness may indeed overlap but they are not identical, and as Jesus describes those who are “blessed,” it’s hard to see “happiness” written on any of these lives.

Jesus begins this teaching, not with promises of happiness, but with promises of blessedness even, and perhaps most, in the hard human experiences of mourning, meekness, peace-making, persecution, and poverty of spirit. Jesus’ form of “blessedness” only makes sense in light of the kingdom of God which sets a new frame of reference for being blessed.

The good news which Jesus was proclaiming was for everyone, and everyone could and can enter the Kingdom of God, but not in the same way- God’s mercy meant doing justice first and foremost for the poorest, the most humiliated and marginalised. For that very reason the Kingdom being at hand was good news for those who were exploited but it was threatening to their exploiters.

Doing justice and loving kindness- trending since 700 BC; restated in the most magnificent way by Jesus in the Sermon on the Mount.

Jesus declared this fact emphatically- that the reign of God is for the poor and the suffering. These were the people whom he was travelling amongst and who were hanging on his every word. Peasants living in the villages, defenceless against rich landowners, often going hungry while the best of their crops were carried off by tax collectors to the seats of the Roman occupiers.

They, more than anyone, needed to hear the good news and be encouraged. Jesus calls them blessed, even in the midst of their unjust suffering, not because they would soon be rich like the large landowners or dishonest merchants but because God was already with them.

He invited them not to resignation, but to hope- he wasn’t making false promises but was giving them a chance to recover their dignity. Rich and poor alike needed to know that God is the defender of the poor: those who were barely surviving, struggling against losing their land and their honour; children threatened with hunger and malnutrition; beggars and prostitutes despised by all; the sick and demon possessed who were denied even a minimum of dignity; lepers marginalised by the society and the religion.

And what is truly incredible is that in blessing the poor, he never praises them for their virtues or qualities. The peasants were quite likely no better than their powerful oppressors- taking advantage of those who were weaker than them, mercilessly demanding payment from those who had borrowed from them. In blessing them, Jesus never said they were good or virtuous, he simply said that they were suffering unjustly. God takes their side not because they deserve it but because they need it. God defends those whom nobody else defends. As the merciful Father of all, God announces his reign by firstly doing justice to those who had never received justice. That had always been his intention and his desire- ‘what does the Lord require of you but to do justice, and to love kindness, and to walk humbly with your God?’

Those of us who know of Jesus’ conflicts with the scribes, the Pharisees and the Chief Priests are familiar with how he was condemned by them for flouting the Law, while they drew his wrath for keeping the letter of the Law to the detriment of the needy and at the expense of mercy.

And it’s very easy and comfortable for us to sit back and take Jesus’ side in those altercations, isn’t it? To assume a Father Ted inspired attitude of ‘those Pharisees, up to no good as usual’.

Yet, Scripture, for all its inspirational value and words of comfort, is also meant to challenge us.

And when Jesus proclaims the kingdom of God and calls for people to repent to make room for the values of that kingdom in their lives, that applies to us right here and now just as much as it applied to the first century residents of Galilee and Judea.

So when Jesus advocates for justice for those who need it, that has to have an effect on the way we look at the world and how we respond to what we see. On how we respond to the issues caused by an influx of refugees fleeing war or oppression. On how we respond to the statistic that a child dies of hunger every 15 seconds, or the knowledge that those who contribute least to climate change suffer most from its effects. Or how we respond when we see or hear abuse of any kind on the streets of our city or on public transport.

The fact that Jesus has a heart for the poor and the hungry and the oppressed and the grieving and the persecuted, doesn’t absolve us from looking out for them- rather it places a greater onus on all of us who purport to follow Jesus to being the people who bring the blessings of the kingdom to them, whether it is by using our time or our money, or simply by being prepared to lavish on them our kindness, compassion, love and respect. The Beatitudes show us exactly where the heart of God is at. And unless our hearts are in the same place then no amount of exquisite choral music in the most beautiful cathedrals, no amount of personal prayer or Bible study, no amount of fasting or preaching will fit us for his Kingdom.

So if at this very moment in time, you can relate to those who are poor in spirit, brought low by the trials and tribulations of this life; if you are mourning some great loss in your life, not just through bereavement but perhaps the loss of a job, or a relationship, or your sense of identity or security; or if you are yearning for righteousness but finding it an uphill struggle; or are persecuted because of who you are, then hear the words Jesus speaks to you today- you are known, you are loved, you are blessed.

And if you are fortunate enough not to relate to any of these, you too are known and loved, but are also being called to be a blessing to those who do.

‘With what shall I come before the Lord, and bow myself before God on high? He has told you, O mortal, what is good; and what does the Lord require of you but to do justice, and to love kindness, and to walk humbly with your God?’