

The Keys to Happiness (3) by Rev John Castle

A sermon given on Sunday 18th March 2018 at St Michael's Church, Sandhurst
(third in a series of three sermons)

Reading: Matthew 5:1-10

Introduction

Can you think of a time when you took the initiative and stood up for what was right? Did you defend a colleague at work who was being badly treated, or a friend at school who was being bullied? Was there a time in a conversation with friends when you dared to disagree with the consensus because you thought the others were being unkind to someone, or prejudiced? Have you ever been tempted to hide the fact that you are a Christian because people might think less well of you, and did you overcome that fear and nail your colours to the mast?

These are all actions that require courage, and it is this quality which we will explore in this, the third and last sermon in our series on the Beatitudes, the sayings of Jesus which we find in the opening verses of the Sermon on the Mount in Matthew's Gospel. The Beatitudes in Matthew are 8 sayings of Jesus in which he calls blessed, or happy, those who embody certain values of God's Kingdom. Jesus is saying that however hard life might be, and whatever the challenges of following him, God will help us and reward us if we do our best to live our lives according to these values.

The Bishop of Oxford has called on Christians this year to reflect on how we can be a more Christ-like Church. He has suggested that the qualities reflected in the Beatitudes can be summed up as being Contemplative, Compassionate and Courageous.

In the first sermon we considered some possible keys to happiness and what it meant to be blessed by God. We saw that according to Jesus true happiness comes as a result of being in tune with God and his will, and we focussed on the Beatitudes that are mainly about our relationship with God – what you might include under the heading of being Contemplative. Jesus says that the poor in spirit and those who mourn are blessed because they recognise their need for God; God blesses those who hunger and thirst to be righteous and who seek to purify their hearts, to be people of integrity who have nothing to hide from God; if we put God at the centre of our lives, then he will satisfy our longing for him and reveal himself to us.

In the second sermon, John White talked about being more Compassionate – mourning for the suffering of the world, being meek and gentle with others, showing mercy in the form of concrete actions to relieve suffering, and being willing to forgive others as we ourselves have been forgiven.

This week we will consider what it means to be more Courageous, and how this quality is reflected in the Beatitudes.

Courage

What is courage? It certainly doesn't mean having no fear. Quite the contrary, it is facing up to our fears and overcoming them. Fear is a very normal human emotion. It is there for our protection, to help us get out of harm's way. But it can also hold us back from moving outside our comfort zone in ways that can be helpful for our own personal development, and for our involvement with others. Some of the greatest human achievements have come from people showing exceptional courage, putting their own lives at risk in order to save others.

What better example could there be than Jesus himself? Jesus went to Jerusalem knowing he would be arrested and crucified. If you are in any doubt whether Jesus was afraid of what he would suffer, read again his prayers in the Garden of Gethsemane, where he pleaded with God to take away his cup of suffering if

there was any other way. And yet, having faced his fears, Jesus accepted the destiny God had planned for him, as he said “Not my will, but yours be done”.

A couple of weeks ago, Pope Francis approved the canonisation of Oscar Romero, who was Archbishop of San Salvador until he was shot dead in 1980 while celebrating Mass. Oscar Romero was murdered because he spoke out against the injustice and violence perpetrated by the government of El Salvador. The day before he was murdered he had made this appeal to the authorities: “In the name of God, and in the name of this suffering people, whose laments rise to heaven each day more tumultuous, I beg you, I beseech you, I order you in the name of God – stop the repression.”

Oscar Romero was someone who “hungered and thirsted for righteousness” – that is, he had a passionate desire for relations between people in his country to be right and just, especially when it came to seeking justice for the poor. He was threatened many times, but had the courage to use his position to speak out for those who had no voice.

Persecution

Jesus’ eighth Beatitude speaks of those who are persecuted for righteousness’ sake, and the two following verses are a further commentary on the blessedness of those who are persecuted simply because they are Christians.

[The early centuries of the Church’s existence were marked with many martyrdoms, not just of Christian leaders but of ordinary Christians who were willing to be tortured and killed rather than renounce their faith. 7th March is the feast of Perpetua and Felicity, one a noblewoman and the other a slave, who were among a group of Christians thrown to wild beasts and killed by gladiators in the Roman arena in Carthage in 203 AD. Both had recently given birth to babies, Felicity while in prison. Perpetua’s father, seeking to spare her from death, had pleaded with his daughter to renounce her faith. But she refused, and showed great leadership in encouraging her companions to remain faithful to Christ.]

Many Christians today need enormous courage to keep faithful to Christ in the face of opposition and even threats from their neighbours and families. Here is part of a story told by a Syrian Christian school teacher, who persuaded his wife to convert from Islam:

Our families started to pressure us and they kicked us out of our home. We moved to another place in the same city, but the threats continued. We became socially rejected and they cut all ties with us; they would not allow my wife to attend her mother’s funeral when she died. I also used to endure threats from my colleagues at work because they heard of my faith and they would neither listen nor sit with me. As a result I used to change from school to school, from one living place to another, because our lives were threatened, for society had rejected our faith. My children also used to fear at school because their fellow students used to call them apostates and told them “you will end up in hell.”¹

As Christians living in the safety of this country, we should be concerned about the suffering of our brothers and sisters in other parts of the world. As a church, we show our solidarity with them by supporting Barnabas Fund, who supplied the story I have just read. We can also take inspiration from their courage, pray for them regularly, and perhaps support them in more active ways, such as signing petitions or writing letters. Perhaps being aware of their experiences may help us to be a little less diffident about acknowledging Christ in our own family, work and social circles.

Peacemakers

What about the peacemakers, whom Jesus singles out for blessing in verse 9? Who do you think of when you hear this word? Possibly the negotiators who try to bring warring factions together to find a peaceful solution to conflict, such as between Palestinians and Israelis, or between the government and rebel factions in Syria, or in South Sudan. Their work is massively important, and many lives are at stake in these conflicts.

But what about conflicts nearer to home – between colleagues in the office, or between family members? God’s will for all people is that we live in peace, which includes harmony and goodwill between people. Seeking to bring peace between people who have fallen out can take a lot of courage, as your intervention

¹ <https://www.barnabasfund.org/en/news/finding-grace> accessed 18 March 2018

may be rejected or misunderstood by one side or the other. In seeking to reconcile friends, you may make enemies. Peacemaking also needs wisdom, and a lot of listening. Conflict often arises from mistrust, and it certainly leads to it. People need to know that their point of view has been listened to and respected, before they are willing to listen to their opponent's point of view.

As a parent, I've had plenty of opportunity to practise my peacemaking skills in my own family, not always with as much success as I'd have liked. And in the time I have lived and worked here I have sadly seen several married couples connected with our church split up, and also heard the stories of many people who have come to us wanting to marry a new partner.

One of the saddest aspects of this for me is when marriages fail because a couple have no one to help them when things start to go wrong, and by the time we are aware of the problem too much water has passed under the bridge and one or both of the partners are unwilling to think about restoring their relationship. Friends may be aware early on, but often lack the courage to challenge someone to consider whether they are really doing the right thing in giving up on their marriage. And the partners themselves may be so hurt that they are afraid to face the situation and fight for their marriage and the wellbeing of the whole family.

There are, of course, other instances, such as repeated domestic abuse, where someone needs to find the courage to leave their partner, for their own safety or the safety of children.

And being a peacemaker isn't just about helping others to sort out their conflicts. What if the conflict is between you and someone else? Perhaps someone has wronged you, or there has been a misunderstanding. It often seems easier to ignore the problem, or hope it will sort itself out, or just to stop speaking to the other person. Most of us hate confrontation, but sometimes having the courage to take an initiative to seek reconciliation can bring a better outcome than you could have dreamed of. We may need the courage to look at our own behaviour or attitude, as well as the courage to bring up a difficult subject with someone.

Conclusion

Why does all of this matter? It matters because we believe that our heavenly Father wants the very best for his children. God's intention is that we should live in peace and harmony with him and with each other. Putting God and the values of his Kingdom at the heart of the way we think, speak and live our lives is the single most important thing we can do if we want to find happiness. Jesus' beatitudes invite us to consider that there is more blessing in living God's way than in living according to what suits us.

In these opening words to the Sermon on the Mount, Jesus challenges us to think differently about ourselves and about others. It takes courage to leave behind old ways of thinking, speaking and acting and letting God's values shape our lives.

But it's worth it. Jesus offers keys to a better, more healthy way of living, in relationship with a God who meets us in our weakness and blesses us as we try to put his values into practice. It's a way of life that is contemplative, that is, it puts God at the centre of the way we think; compassionate, which means reaching out to others with sympathy and kindness; and courageous, standing up for what we believe, fighting for justice and doing what we can to bring peace and reconciliation between people.

As we approach Holy Week and Easter, the gospel story shows us how Jesus, inspired and strengthened by his own relationship with God, reached out to others with compassion, faced the destiny God had called him to with courage and ultimately brought life out of death, healing and reconciliation out of suffering and injustice.

He calls us who are called Christians to follow him. Are we up for the challenge?