

Keys to happiness (1) by Rev John A. Castle

A sermon given on Sunday 25th February 2018 at St Michael's Church, Sandhurst

Readings Deuteronomy 8:1-10, Psalm 103, **Matthew 5:1-10**

5 When Jesus saw the crowds, he went up the mountain; and after he sat down, his disciples came to him. ²Then he began to speak, and taught them, saying:

³'Blessed are the poor in spirit, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven.

⁴'Blessed are those who mourn, for they will be comforted.

⁵'Blessed are the meek, for they will inherit the earth.

⁶'Blessed are those who hunger and thirst for righteousness, for they will be filled.

⁷'Blessed are the merciful, for they will receive mercy.

⁸'Blessed are the pure in heart, for they will see God.

⁹'Blessed are the peacemakers, for they will be called children of God.

¹⁰'Blessed are those who are persecuted for righteousness' sake, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven.

Introduction: The Keys to Happiness

I wonder what expectations this title raises in you? It could be the title of a self-help book, focussed on the individual: what do you want out of life, out of your relationships, your family, your work? How can you achieve your goals, improve your well-being and attain a sense of peace and being in control of your life? You may well be cynical of any person, method or organisation that claims to have the keys to happiness.

In researching for this sermon I found online an organisation called Action For Happiness. Its founder, Lord Richard Layard, says scientific research has identified several factors in happiness: the most important one is the quality of our relationships; other factors include work; relationships in the wider community; emotional health; helping other people; having a meaning in life. According to this [website](#) "Scientific research shows that having a connection to something bigger than ourselves, a religious belief or spiritual side to our lives makes us happier and healthier."

I suppose none of this will seem particularly surprising: it's either common sense or it just confirms what we know from our Christian faith.

Of course, the important question is, how do you define happiness? Lord Richard Layard defines it thus; "Happiness means feeling good about our lives and wanting to go on feeling that way. Unhappiness means feeling bad and wanting things to change".

The Beatitudes

But let's look for a moment at another word, which is used as a title for today's gospel reading: Beatitudes. This word isn't in the text of the gospel of Matthew, but it's put in as a title by modern editors. The word means happiness or Blessedness, and is used because Matthew 5:3 and the following few verses all begin with the word *blessed* – *beati* in Latin or in the original Greek, *makarioi*. In ancient Greek, and in the New Testament, *makarios* means both happy and blessed. In the worldview of ancient times, God, or the gods, controlled everything, so being happy was a result of

receiving divine favour. It didn't just mean that you *felt* good about things, which is the definition that Lord Richard Layard gave, but it meant that things were actually going better for you as well.

This word *makarios* or *makarioi* (the plural) is the word used in the Greek version of the Old Testament, which was the version used by the early church and the writers of the gospels. You may be familiar with some of these quotations:

Blessed is the man
who walks not in the counsel of the wicked,
nor stands in the way of sinners,
nor sits in the seat of scoffers;
but his delight is in the law of the LORD,
and on his law he meditates day and night.
He is like a tree planted by streams of water,
that yields its fruit in its season,
and its leaf does not wither.
In all that he does, he prospers. (Psalm 1:1-3 RSV)

Blessed are those whose way is blameless,
who walk in the law of the LORD! (Psalm 119:1 RSV)

Blessed is he who considers the poor!
The LORD delivers him in the day of trouble;
the LORD protects him and keeps him alive;
he is called blessed in the land. (Psalm 41:1-2a RSV).

Blessed is everyone who fears the LORD,
who walks in his ways!
You shall eat the fruit of the labour of your hands;
you shall be happy, and it shall be well with you. (Psalm 128:1-2)

I have quoted from the Revised Standard Version. If you look at the New RSV you will see that in these passages the word *happy* has been used instead of *blessed*.

For those of you who realise that the Old Testament was originally written in Hebrew, not Greek, let me just say that in all these instances the Greek *makarios* or *makarioi* is translating one word in Hebrew, *ashré* which means the same thing.

Have you noticed a common theme in each of these quotations? Those who show respect for God by living their lives in accordance with his laws receive blessing from the Lord – they don't just feel good, but their lives flourish, they prosper and they receive God's protection. God honours those who honour him, not just with their lips, but with the whole of their lives.

The same idea was behind our Old Testament passage from Deuteronomy. The laws given to the Israelites by Moses were intended to help them order their individual, family and community life according to God's values. In their time of adversity in the wilderness they had known God's provision. Now they were to take what they had learned about dependence on God into their new life in the promised land. But although the resources of the promised land were good, prosperity was not guaranteed: injustice and idolatry within the community and hostile nations on the outside could bring disaster, and eventually did.

We will never achieve happiness if we seek it simply in self-fulfilment. Our first priority must be to put God at the centre of our lives. This is what Jesus is getting at in Matthew chapter 6 when he says *Seek first God's kingdom and his righteousness, and all these things will be yours as well* (Matthew 6:33). God our heavenly Father knows our needs; we should trust him to provide, and devote our energy to seeking his righteousness, i.e. being in a right relationship with God and with our neighbour – and perhaps we should include our environment.

The Teaching of Jesus

Bishop Steven has asked us to spend some time during the course of this year exploring what it would mean for us to be a more Christ-like church, using the Beatitudes as a guide. He points out that Jesus himself embodied the qualities which he speaks of in the Beatitudes, and if we are to be Jesus' witnesses and ambassadors in the world then we need to live these out too. The world desperately needs the transforming power of Christ, and we are called to be agents of his Kingdom.

Bishop Steven has summarised the qualities mentioned in the Beatitudes under 3 headings: being Contemplative, Compassionate and Courageous. The first is particularly about our relationship with God; the second and third are more about how we live out our faith with others. For convenience, Bishop Steven has allocated each of the Beatitudes to one of these categories. I'm not sure I would place each of them in the same categories as the bishop, and perhaps some of them could be placed in more than one category. But anyway, let's look for a few minutes at some that seem to be about our relationship with God, the Contemplative Beatitudes. Next week and in 3 weeks' time we'll look at the other headings.

Blessed are the poor in spirit, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven.

I'll admit that I find this verse one of the most difficult to understand in the Beatitudes. What does it mean to be *poor in spirit*?

In the Old Testament, the poor are those who are in need of help, particularly widows, orphans and foreign immigrants to the community, all of whom depend on others to help them survive. By contrast, the rich are often portrayed as self-sufficient and liable to complacency and arrogance towards God. Thinking about our own experiences of trying to live as Christians, I think many of us would say that the harder we try to be "good Christians", and to have faith in God in all circumstances, the more we recognise our shortcomings. So this Beatitude comes to us as a word of encouragement: Jesus is saying that it's OK to be spiritually poor, to recognise your shortcomings and your need of God. It's in humility that we become open to receiving God's help. And, more than this, we are guaranteed that the Kingdom of heaven is ours. After all, God doesn't love us because we are worthy, but in spite of our unworthiness. That's what's so amazing about grace. What we need to do is to acknowledge our spiritual need to him.

Blessed are those who mourn, for they will be comforted.

Sadness and grief are a normal part of human life. It might seem rather contradictory to describe the grief-stricken as "blessed", let alone "happy". But it is in our losses that we recognise our vulnerability, and through this are able to receive comfort. So here again, by recognising our emotional needs we are able to be more in touch with God.

But some commentators think this isn't just about grief for personal loss; it includes our sorry for our failings and sins, and our grief about the sins of the world. Jesus wept over Jerusalem, grieving at the hardness of heart of his people and their leaders, and at the prospect of disaster that would overtake them in years to come as a consequence. God blesses those who weep not only at their own losses and sins, but for those of others.

Blessed are those who hunger and thirst for righteousness, for they will be filled.

This is another Beatitude that I find hard to understand. We first of all have to know what is meant by *righteousness*. The word is all about things being right, especially relationships between people and between people and God. Hunger and thirst are metaphors for intense longing for things to change: for ourselves to be right with God and for human affairs to be right and just. More on that another time ... But for now, let's remember that this, like all of Jesus' Beatitudes, ends with a promise: *they will be filled* or *satisfied*. When we truly cry out to God, longing for things to be put right between us and him, or between us and others, he answers our prayer.

Blessed are the pure in heart, for they will see God.

Psalm 24 asks the question

Who shall ascend the hill of the LORD?

And who shall stand in his holy place? (Ps 24:3 NRSV)

And the answer is

Those who have clean hands and pure hearts,
who do not lift up their souls to what is false,
and do not swear deceitfully. (Ps 24:4 NRSV)

The Greek version actually says “the pure in heart”, which are the words Jesus uses in verse 8. The psalm is talking about the greatness of God and the attitudes of those who want to worship him. God is looking for an integrity of heart and life, where what we say with our lips is matched by how we live our lives. Jesus promises that those who are pure in heart will see God. This is not just about seeing him face to face when we get to heaven, but it’s about experiencing his loving presence here on earth too. It’s also about coming to God with pure motives, or perhaps asking God by his Holy Spirit to search us out, to show us if there are things that are getting in the way of us coming closer to him.

True Happiness

So are you now any the wiser about what are the keys to happiness? At the beginning of this sermon I mentioned the attempts of one modern organisation to analyse the things that make people feel happy, such as good relationships, emotional health and having a purpose in life, all of which are thoroughly laudable and consistent with a Christian understanding of life.

But Jesus offers a more radical approach: true happiness is a blessing from God, and is achieved when we seek first his Kingdom and begin to implement its values in our lives. The first key to happiness is to know not only that we need God but that he loves us in spite of our shortcomings and sins, and to respond to that love by coming to him for forgiveness, cleansing and restoration. The second key is to actively and boldly live and work to show God’s love to the world. And that will be the subject of the next two instalments of our series on the Beatitudes.

Appendix: “10 Keys to Happier Living” according to <http://www.actionforhappiness.org/10-keys-to-happier-living>

1. Do things for others
2. Connect with people
3. Take care of your body
4. Live life mindfully
5. Keep learning new things
6. Have goals to look forward to
7. Find ways to bounce back
8. Look for what is good
9. Be comfortable with who you are
10. Be part of something bigger