

Matthew 5 v 1-16

I've recently been in the United States. And one of the things it made me realise was that we're not very patriotic in this country any more, I don't think. I always thought we were, you know, Last Night of the Proms, the FA Cup final (though let's not mention yesterday's match), the queen and her corgi's. Cups of tea and scones. David Beckham. Well, yes. But actually I think we're quite a self-deprecating country. We certainly don't go on very much about how good it is living in Britain. We're much more likely to complain about the state of our schools or the NHS. Or of course the good old British weather.

The U.S seems to me to be very different, and I don't mean that in a bad way in particular, in case you're an American sitting here thinking I'm having a go. But if there's one country which is very aware and proud of what's good about living there, it has to be the US I think. They're big over there on what blessings there are for Americans. The American constitution is a famous and well known document that people talk about a lot. People seem to know their American history better than we know ours (though admittedly they do have about a few thousand years less history to learn about). But it's famously known as the land of the free and the home of the brave. The land of opportunity. Most Americans seem proud to be American.

Well the Beatitudes that we're studying together this morning are all to do with another nation, or kingdom, and why it is a blessed thing to belong to it. The Kingdom of Heaven. Kingdom of heaven, by the way, is simply Matthew's way of saying "the kingdom of God". It means the same thing. We know they're all about the kingdom of heaven for two reasons.

Firstly because the first and last beatitude are about the kingdom of heaven. Look with me now at verses 3 and 10 of Matthew 5. "Blessed are the poor in spirit, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven....., blessed are those who are persecuted for righteousness' sake, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven." That indicates to us that all the ones in between are about the kingdom of heaven as well. So this series of sayings is a kind of manifesto for the kingdom of heaven.

Secondly, we know it's about the kingdom of heaven because of what Matthew has told us so far in his gospel. He's been telling us in lots of ways that Jesus is the King, promised in the Old Testament. One example of this is in chapter 4v15-17, where Jesus fulfils the prophecy of Isaiah 9, of the future ruler who will bring in a never-ending kingdom. And Matthew has also told us that John the Baptist and Jesus himself, have been preaching specifically about the kingdom of heaven.

So with that in mind, we're going to look this morning at 3 aspects of the Kingdom of Heaven. Hopefully it will be time well spent this morning, better than the £5 and 2 hours I wasted watching the film of the same title the other week.

Firstly, the kingdom is a blessed kingdom.

The kingdom of heaven is a blessed kingdom. It's not hard to spot from a quick read through of this passage that one of the themes is blessing. There are a lot of blessings in the kingdom of heaven.

Perhaps if this was a manifesto about Britain it would go something like: "blessed are the Brits, for they will have free speech". Or "blessed are the Brits, for they have a welfare state". Or, because we're always putting ourselves down: "Blessed are the Brits, for they have a strong currency and cheap easyjet flights so we can get away from our miserable weather whenever we want to".

What about the Americans? Blessed are the Americans, for they live in the land of opportunity. Blessed are the Americans, for they live in the land of the free.

What are the blessings of the kingdom of heaven, then?

The most striking thing is that the blessings of the kingdom are wonderful! There's comfort, instead of mourning. There's a huge inheritance – subjects of the kingdom will inherit the whole earth! Wow! There's a satisfaction, a filling, of spiritual hunger and thirst. There's no punishment in the kingdom of heaven – there's mercy! And in verses 8 and 9 there's a picture of a perfect relationship with God there. The subjects will see God, and they will be called his children. That is some blessing.

And there's also simply the idea of blessing itself – being blessed by God! Those in the kingdom will be favoured by God, he blesses them. The very idea that the God of the universe would bless anyone – that's something pretty special! It's an amazing thing – for God, to bless you. Think about that.

We've only skimmed over those, but I wonder whether we appreciate enough how great it is to be in the Kingdom of God. It's a blessed place to be. It's a wonderful place.

But if you're not a Christian here this morning, then these blessings paint a picture for you of what you're missing out on. You are not a member of his kingdom, you are not blessed by him. You're missing out on mercy, forgiveness, comfort, a perfect relationship with God. If you're not blessed by God, you're in a terrible place to be. Because the implication is that if you're not blessed, you're cursed

But while we could think about that for a lot longer, I think actually that there's another blessing that Jesus is referring to here. Because we have to remember who Jesus was talking to, and who Matthew was writing to. Jesus was speaking to Jews. Jews who knew their Old Testaments. And Matthew was writing primarily to Jews. And those first hearers and readers would have known that Jesus' words here weren't original.

You may well have heard people who aren't Christians say that the sermon on the mount is beautiful teaching, that they try to live by it, that it's the essence of all true religion.

Gandhi, famously, was a particular admirer of the beautiful moral teachings of the sermon. But Gandhi clearly didn't know his Old Testament. If he had, he would have recognised that Jesus was using Old Testament language, and quoting directly

from the Old Testament here. So if we're to understand them properly we also need to dig around a little in the Old Testament.

Unfortunately we don't have time to look at all the passages that all these beatitudes refer to, but let me take you through a few to show you what I mean.

Look first at Isaiah 61, which we had read to us before. Isaiah 61 seems to be one of Jesus' favourite passages, because he quotes from it a lot:

pause

“The LORD has anointed me to preach good news to the **poor**.

He has sent me to bind up the broken-hearted, to proclaim freedom for the captives and release from darkness for the prisoners,

² to proclaim the year of the LORD's favour and the day of vengeance of our God, to **comfort all who mourn**,

³ and provide for those who grieve in Zion— to bestow on them a crown of beauty instead of ashes, the oil of gladness instead of **mourning**, and a garment of praise instead of a spirit of despair. They will be called oaks of **righteousness**, a planting of the LORD for the display of his splendour.

Then down to verse 6

⁶ And you will be called priests of the LORD, you will be named ministers of our God. You will **feed** on the wealth of nations, and in their **riches** you will boast.

⁷ Instead of their shame my people will receive a double portion, and instead of disgrace they will rejoice in their **inheritance**; and so they will **inherit** a double portion in their land, and everlasting joy will be theirs.”

So did you notice the language here from several of the beatitudes? The mourners comforted, the poor being blessed, the righteousness of the kingdom, the language of inheritance. And the exiled and oppressed people being liberated and restored to their kingdom.

This is a passage speaking to Jews 600 years before Jesus' time, who'd been booted out of their own land of Israel, and taken off to exile in Babylon. And in it God promises to liberate the captives, to gain vengeance on his enemies, and enable his people to rebuild the ruins of their kingdom. God's exiled people, the poor, the mourning, will be blessed with the restoration of their kingdom. They'll be free! They won't be hungry or thirsty anymore. They won't be oppressed by other nations, in fact other nations will serve them, verse 5, which we didn't read! Their cities will be rebuilt, they will prosper, they will be rich.

So Jesus seems to be linking the coming of his kingdom with the restoration of the kingdom which was promised to the Jews.

We see something similar in Psalm 37 and Psalm 18. You don't need to turn to them, it should appear on the screen.

Psalm 37 is absolutely full of references to how God's people will "inherit the land". Verse 11 mirrors the 3rd beatitude, when it says "the meek shall inherit the land, and delight themselves in abundant peace". And it's a psalm all about God's rescue and deliverance of his people from the evil nations around them.

Finally Psalm 18v 25. And it should remind you of the 5th and 6th beatitudes, with its talk of the mercy being shown mercy and the pure being shown purity.

And what is Psalm 18 about?

Well the title of the Psalm tells us. It's about God rescuing David and his people, from all his enemies.

That's just a brief sketch of the Old Testament background, but it's the same pattern seen in the rest of the beatitudes too. The language of the beatitudes is the language used in the old testament of the restoration of the kingdom to the Jews.

So do you see what Jesus is doing here? Do you see how these beatitudes are not just a series of abstract beautiful blessings to some unspecified people?

They are announcements of liberation and restoration for an oppressed and persecuted people. Jesus is confirming here that God's promises haven't been forgotten. That the kingdom which he's bringing in is the same kingdom promised in the Old Testament, and that it's a kingdom which will bring to an end oppression and slavery and bring in the blessings of a perfect relationship with God.

You may well ask – but this liberation was promised as a physical liberation for the Jews. Now, we're not slaves or exiles, and we're not the Jews, so how does this message of liberation speak to us?

Well Jesus elsewhere makes it clear that the liberation he brings, is freedom from sin. One quick example, John chapter 8: "everyone who commits sin is a slave to sin....if the son sets you free, you will be free indeed".

The language of liberation should be a reminder to us that being in the kingdom means being set free from sin, set free from God's judgment.

So the kingdom of heaven is a blessed place not just because there's mercy and comfort etc. It's a blessed place because it's the place where God's people will be free! Free from the slavery and oppression of sin. It's a place of liberation.

After seeing the blessings of the kingdom, though, we look next at another important feature of the Kingdom of Heaven. And we see that the kingdom is a counter cultural kingdom.

The kingdom is a counter-cultural kingdom

In the election just gone, there was a lot of talk about "hard working families", I don't know if you noticed that. All the various leaders went on and on about how hard working families would be rewarded for their efforts. "Blessed are the hard working brits, for they will be rewarded for it".

That's the culture we live in isn't it. You have to work for whatever you want. Nothing comes for free. You have to earn it.

And it's a culture which focuses on rights, isn't it. Standing up for your rights and being aggressive, looking after number one, really gets you places. So, where I work. in the NHS, if you pester your doctor about how long you're going to be waiting for your appointment or operation, then you're likely to get it quicker.

Or if you're trying to buy or sell a house, things get sped up if you nag and pester your estate agent.

In money matters, if you're a little devious and tell a few white lies on your tax return you can end up significantly richer.

In job interviews, it's the people who are good at talking themselves up and missing out convenient details on their CV who get the good jobs.

At work, if you ask for a pay rise, you're much more likely to get one than if you sit quietly in the corner just hoping you might.

In life in general it seems to be the assertive, loud and aggressive people who seem to get things their way, and the self sufficient ones who are admired.

Well, that may be how to get blessed in the United Kingdom, but in the kingdom of heaven it's completely different.

The people in the kingdom of heaven are the kind of people who would be pitied or ridiculed by most people in this world.

They're the ones who are too pure for their own good – who won't cheat on their tax return. The ones whose honesty gets them into trouble, sometimes.

They're the poor in spirit, who recognise their weakness and that they really have nothing much to offer God at all, they're utterly dependent on him.

They're the ones who love to make peace, rather than stir up trouble for their own gain.

They're the ones who hunger and thirst for righteousness, for God's justice to be seen, and who aren't satisfied by the things of this world.

Yes, the people in the kingdom of heaven are different to those around them. And that means that they stand out. That's what verses 13-16 are about. Look at them now. They're like salt, which by its very nature is salty and distinguishable. Like light, which by its very nature other people see. Like a city on a hill, which can be seen for miles around.

It's when they're different, counter-cultural, that Kingdom people are noticed by those around them. Look at verse 16. It makes other people sit up and realise that there's something different. And that ends up with glory going to God.

Imagine you were a King setting up your own kingdom. If you wanted a kingdom that would change the world, what kind of people would you choose to be in it? I think most people would choose rich people, who could finance it, the successful people, the people who can influence others, the assertive, those who are able to get things done – by whatever means. You wouldn't choose the kind of people listed in the beatitudes here, would you?

But that's what God, in his wisdom, has done. By having people in his kingdom who aren't going to seek glory for themselves, who are humble and poor in spirit, who aren't impressive by the world's standards, people in the world are changed, and God brings glory to himself instead.

The question for us, of course, is whether or not we are living like this. Have we believed the world's lie that the way to make an impact for God is to be like everyone else? To stand up for our own rights above those of others? Have we been influenced by the world such that we don't think it's that bad to fiddle your taxes or take a slightly-too-long lunch break? Are we peacemakers – people who wherever possible seek to resolve conflict rather than create it. Have we been distracted by the pleasures of this world and no longer put righteousness as the thing we desire most of all? If we want people to see us and give glory to God, if we want to have an impact in this world, we must trust God's word when it says, as it does here, that it is distinctive Christian living that will make this happen.

But there's one surprise left for us in this passage. And it's actually, I think, the most important thing in this passage, so if you haven't been listening so far, or you've drifted off, at least try and concentrate for the next 10 minutes or so.

The surprise of the kingdom of God is that the kingdom is a persecuted kingdom.

The kingdom is a persecuted kingdom

Remember that back at the beginning of chapter 4, Jesus has already identified himself as the promised ruler of Isaiah 9, whose kingdom will be one of peace and justice that will last forever. And at the end of chapter 4, Jesus is doing miracles left right and centre, the crowds are gathering from far and wide, the excitement is really mounting.

So you can imagine Jesus, sitting there, with the crowd of disciples gathered around him on this mountain, all of them getting increasingly excited about the kingdom about to come their way.

Then as they hear verse 3-10, with all the echoes from the Old Testament, their excitement increases! The promised victory **is** coming! The Romans will soon be gone. Once again, Israel is going to be liberated to enjoy peace and prosperity forever, and it's only just around the corner!

And in verses 3-10, Jesus has been talking in quite vague terms. "Blessed are **those**", he says. But look at the change in verse 11. [quote] The pattern of the other beatitudes isn't followed here. Not only does Jesus expand on the beatitude about persecution, which he doesn't do for any of the others, but he makes it personal. He really wants them to understand this.

So in the midst of this mounting excitement, you can imagine that perhaps Jesus suddenly looks at them, or points the finger at them and says:

"blessed are **you**, when others revile **you** and persecute **you** and utter all kinds of evil against **you** on **my** account".

“What do you mean, Jesus? You’re the Messiah king aren’t you? You’ve just healed thousands of people and been casting out demons. Surely you’re too powerful to let persecution happen? Your kingdom is victorious and powerful and peaceful and neverending.”

Well, he gets even more surprising, because he goes on to say “rejoice and be glad”! What? Rejoice at persecution? Yes. “rejoice and be glad”, he says, “for your reward is great in heaven, for so they persecuted the prophets before you”.

Wow. That is the surprise of the kingdom in this passage. That living in the kingdom, even the kingdom of a powerful and victorious king, will involve suffering and persecution.

Imagine, for a second, Tony Blair giving his speech the day after winning the election: don’t worry, I won’t try and do an impression:

“Well folks, welcome to the United kingdom in the third term of my government. It’s going to be great. Blessings galore! And, wait for it, you’re even going to be able to get persecuted! Rejoice and be glad! Fantastic.”

Well, Tony isn’t going to say that I don’t think. But Jesus did, so what are we going to make of it? There are 2 lessons I think.

Firstly we need to realise that the kingdom is future as well as present. “rejoice and be glad, *for great is your reward in heaven.*”
The kingdom is future as well as present.

You may have noticed that there’s a different tense used in the first and last beatitudes compared with the middle ones. So in v3 and v11, it’s in the present tense. “Theirs **is** the kingdom of heaven”, while in the ones in between the rewards are future. “they **shall** be comforted, they **shall** inherit the earth, they **shall** be filled” and so on. And that’s what Jesus says in verse 12 as well isn’t it? The reward is future – it’s in heaven, he says. The kingdom of heaven is a “now, but not yet” kingdom. It is here now, but it’s not fully here yet.

So the subjects of his kingdom will be persecuted. Just because Jesus is King, just because he is powerful, and just because we share in that kingdom, does not mean that we have all the blessings of the kingdom **now**.

So take one example, mourning, in v4. The people who mourn over sin in their own lives, and over the wrong in this world, are the people who will be comforted in the kingdom. But while we’re in the kingdom now, we still mourn. We are still sinful, and it still pains us to see the sin in our lives and in our church family. And while in some ways, we are comforted now by the knowledge of forgiveness and the gospel, our complete comfort will not come until heaven. We have to wait for that. Revelation 21 says that only in heaven will there be no more mourning.

I wonder whether some of the disciples were disappointed by this? Did some of them perhaps wander off, thinking that Jesus can't have been that great a King if his followers had to be persecuted? That being in the kingdom wasn't about blessing at all?

What do you think yourself? Have you faced up to the fact that being in the kingdom at the moment doesn't mean the easy life? That even though we serve a great King, life now will still involve mourning, we still have to come to God with nothing to offer, we will be persecuted, no matter how faithful we are? Do you feel that God has let you down, when you're persecuted, because an all-powerful God should be able to stop that happening to you? When most of the blessings that we're promised, like seeing God, and being completely satisfied and comforted, will only completely be ours in the next life?

If that is how you feel, then you haven't yet really understood what it means to be in the kingdom. It's a life that primarily looks forwards to heaven, to the rewards of the next life. It's basic to life in the kingdom.

We need to remember these things in evangelism too. We live in a world and especially a city where people feel trapped – trapped by poverty, drugs, illness, abusive relationships. And so the liberation that the Beatitudes talk about can be especially appealing to people. Talking about liberation gets people interested. And the gospel is good news for them.

But we need to be very careful about what the good news is. The liberation is not necessarily from whatever problems our friends and our community think they have in the here and now. It's from a problem far bigger than poverty. Becoming a Christian may make their lives worse, in some ways. The complete comfort is future, the inheritance is future. If we're going around promising them that if they join the kingdom they'll be liberated in the here and now from all their problems, they're going to end up disappointed, aren't they.

Secondly, and much more briefly, we need to realise that persecution is something that has always marked out God's faithful people. That's what Jesus is saying in v 12 when he says "great is your reward in heaven, *for so they persecuted the prophets before you*".

Even back in the Old testament, God's prophets, his chosen messengers, were persecuted, and hated. What Jesus seems to be saying is that the reason it's a privilege to be persecuted for his sake, is that it's a sign that you really are one of God's people, destined for heaven. Rejoice, and be glad, he says! If you're persecuted because of me, you're standing at the end of a long line of faithful prophets who were persecuted too.

That's why it's something to rejoice about. When people are persecuted because of their Christian beliefs, it's evidence that they really are one of God's people, in his kingdom, because that's exactly what happened to the prophets.

Think about the flip side to the coin. It's not made explicit in this passage, but if we sail through life **not** being persecuted, we have to ask ourselves the question of whether or not we really are in the kingdom.

Because living distinctive, different, Christian lives will make people notice us, and while some will give glory to God, it is also likely to lead to persecution.

And that's something that the rest of the New testament tells us a lot more about – most of all, of course, it tells us that when we're persecuted we are privileged to be associated with Jesus himself. Most shockingly of all, even the victorious King himself suffered, so we should also be glad to suffer for his name.

In all of this, then, Jesus is giving a surprising twist to what the Jews understood of the Old Testament. Yes, the kingdom promised there is coming, he says, but not quite in the way you expected.

And the relation of Jesus to the Old Testament is what next week's passage is all about.

So, to sum up then.

The kingdom is a wonderful kingdom, full of blessing, and it is here. Are you in it, and if you are, do you thank God for its blessings?

Living in the kingdom means being different from the world around us, a difference that other people notice. Is that true of your life?

If it is, you can expect people to notice it – some might praise God, but others will persecute you.....

Because living in the kingdom means following in the line of all God's faithful people, and being persecuted, but rejoicing in that because it confirms your inheritance, and because your rewards are not on this earth, but in heaven.