

St John's Holy Communion 24th June 2018

As I said earlier, it's St John's day today – and I had a bit of a dilemma over the readings to choose for today. Normally today the readings would be about John the Baptist, but we are in the middle of a sermon series on the Beatitudes, the words that Jesus spoke to his followers that are recorded in Matthew chapter 5. So I was torn between preaching a sermon on John, and baptism, or sticking with the readings for our Beatitudes series, specifically today, “Blessed are the meek, for they shall inherit the earth.” I've gone for the latter, but as I have prepared it has occurred to me that what Jesus says here, in this verse, is actually not dissimilar to some of the things John the Baptist said too.

Because this is all about justice.

But before we get to that, here's a quick recap on the Beatitudes so far.

'Blessed' can have the meaning 'joy-filled' or 'complete'. It's a deeper word than just 'happy'. It has a sense of being secure and content deep inside.

We have learned that Jesus probably drew on the words of Isaiah in the Old Testament who spoke of being anointed to bring good news to the poor, to bind up the broken hearted, to comfort those who mourn. Isaiah was speaking words of hope to a community devastated by loss, burdened by oppression, suffering injustice and pain.

And in recent weeks we have been realising that Jesus was speaking words of hope, words of promise, to the people of his own day who were rejected by society, looked down on by the religious leaders, people who felt abandoned by their society and by God.

And Jesus was saying, “No! Not so! The kingdom of heaven is for these people. The door is open for them. The religious leaders have got it all wrong! God does not reject the poor in spirit, the outcasts, the broken, and those who mourn. On the contrary, his heart breaks for them. He wants them in his kingdom.”

And if you look at Jesus' life, all through the gospels he went around healing the sick, restoring the dignity of those who had been trampled, and putting broken lives back together.

So if you are here this morning feeling broken, rejected, or at the bottom of the pile, Jesus says to you, “the kingdom of God is yours – it's for you.”

Jesus also challenged injustice wherever he saw it.

And that's really what today's verse, and today's story, is all about – justice.

“Blessed are the meek, for they shall inherit the earth”.

We often take meek to mean timid, but that's not really what it means in this context. It was a word often used in Jesus' day to describe those who were victims of injustice – and one of the injustices of Jesus' day was that some people were landless and at the mercy of rich landowners.

In Jesus' day having land protected people against poverty. They were able to grow enough food to sustain themselves and their families, or to trade. It was their living and their security. It was written into Jewish law that no family could lose their land permanently. If they had to sell land, perhaps to pay a debt, it was only ever meant to be a temporary loss. After 50 years, in a year of Jubilee, all land was meant to be returned to the family that had owned it.

But that rule wasn't followed. Rich landowners got richer, and the landless poor were often destitute. It wasn't right in God's eyes, and in Psalm 37 the psalmist promises that God will make sure justice is done. He tells the poor and oppressed not to fret about the wicked, not become angry or bitter, but to trust and wait for God to act - God would deal with the wicked one day. Justice would be done. And those who trust in the Lord and wait for him will receive the desires of their heart. “The meek will inherit the land.”

What about the story Jesus told about the labourers in the vineyard? The labourers waiting to be hired were the landless poor. Their only hope of having food to eat was if someone hired them. A denarius was the sum required daily to keep a family fed. So when the landowner in the story pays everyone a days wages, even those hired last, you could say he is executing justice. The meek – the landless poor – get what they need.

The meek will inherit the earth.

So what's the challenge to us from this little verse. Who are the meek in our society today? Who are the one's who have nothing because others have everything and don't want to share?

Could it be the families who were devastated by the fire in Grenfell Tower? Could it be the refugees who are risking their lives trying to cross the Mediterranean because they have nothing to live on in their own countries. Or

closer to home, could it be those who are relying on foodbanks while they wait for their first universal credit payments?

What's the challenge to the church?

To be like Jesus. To challenge injustice. To speak up for those who can't speak for themselves. To be generous and full of grace. To long see people who are oppressed set free, and given what they need, and what is right, and fair.

And that's where the link to John the Baptist comes in.

We read in Luke that people came to him to be baptised and he said to them, "Produce fruit in keeping with repentance." In other words, "show your change of heart by living changed lives". The crowds asked what that meant in practice, and John replied:

"The man with two tunics should share with him who has none, and the one who has food should do the same."

To tax collectors, he said, "Don't collect more money than you should."

To soldiers and bullies he said, "Don't extort money, don't accuse people falsely, be content with your pay."

In other words, "Act justly, and be generous to those in need."

Baptism meant a changed life – it wasn't just a ceremony you could go through and then forget about as though it never happened. It was a sign of a change of heart and a changed life.

As adults went under the water they were dying to their old way of life, and as they came up out of the water they were rising to a new life, lived God's way.

A life like Jesus lived.

And that's our challenge. As individuals and as a church.

How can we live more like Jesus did today, in our context?

On the notice sheet you will find three questions to ponder:

Who are 'the meek'?

How did Jesus respond (or not) to the meek? How did they respond to him?

How does that challenge us?

Take those away, pray over them, ask God to show you the things you need to see.

Let's pray.