

## Essex Civic Service 5 March 2017

I want to speak to you today about the Beatitudes, that puzzling and challenging text that comes at the beginning of the Sermon on the Mount in Matthew's gospel.

I was recently in Washington DC speaking at a conference on mission for the Church in North America. It is a great city, and it was moving to visit the Lincoln Memorial and read the Gettysburg Address which is written in full on a plaque beside the statue of Lincoln. At only 286 words it is one of the great speeches of human history and still powerful to read today in its appeal to what is best in human nature. Brevity matched by clarity matched by passion is a powerful combination.

When his disciples asked him to teach them how to pray, Jesus gave them a prayer which at only 66 words long, nevertheless tells them, and us, just about everything we need to know on the subject. It is brief and clear.

By comparison, and at the other end of the spectrum, it is often quoted that the Government regulations for the sale of cabbage run to 26,911 words. You will be relieved to hear that I have not researched the length of Essex County Council minutes, reports or regulations. Though my word count tells me that this sermon comes in at a woefully protracted 1,414 words: shorter than the cabbage regulations, but more than four times the length of the Gettysburg Address. I will, however, try to be clear.

However, let us also be cautious about concluding that short is always beautiful: the current successor to Lincoln is well known for his late night tweeting. These missives may be brief – just 140 characters or less - but they are not always clear, nor am I convinced they will be remembered in years to come, nor carved in stone alongside his statue, if there ever is such a thing.

But today's reading, coming in at a remarkably succinct 102 words, passes the brevity test with flying colours, but is also a little more challenging when it comes to clarity. We read it and read it, but are not at all sure what it means. Is Jesus really telling us that it is good to be poor, to be bereaved, to be persecuted? And meekness certainly seems to go against the grain of everything else we have been taught. Is this text really worth remembering at all; isn't it just a council of despair, asking each of us to be docile and diffident, a hand wringing door mat upon which the world wipes its feet?

Or, even if we do understand it differently, is it a kind of pick and mix selection of attributes that we can choose between, a sort of divine personality profile in which we work out our spiritual preferences: so she is more 'peacemaker' than 'poor in spirit'; he 'hungers and thirsts for righteousness' but is not very 'pure in heart'. We can therefore pat ourselves on the back for our supposed meekness or purity, and let ourselves off the hook when it comes to showing mercy to others. Those howl against immigrants, but still want the NHS properly staffed, please note.

Or is it some sort of spiritual psychometric test in which we can be sorted, graded and placed in order? After all, there is nothing any of us like more than puffing ourselves up and bringing others down.

No, the Beatitudes are hard, not because they ask us to be timorous or something other than ourselves, but because they ask us to be like Christ, who alone shows us, by his own life, what the beatitudes mean: he alone is pure in heart, merciful righteous; and because they show us what our lives are meant to be.

And the Beatitudes are challenging, not because they are a test, but because, taken as a whole, they describe what it means to live as a child of another kingdom, this world as it could be if we live under the rule of God and his ways of justice and peace. Hence, they must be taken as a whole and altogether they describe the new humanity that is shown us in Jesus Christ. They are, therefore, challenging and relevant for all human life and all human enterprise. They have something to say to civic as well as spiritual life. Indeed the test of our spiritual life is not how holy we are feeling, but how these values and aspirations shape our decision making, our actions, fuel our resolve, especially when times are tough, and set the compass of our civic and national life.

So, let us take them as a whole, all 102 words of them. For to be poor in spirit means to be someone who knows that they need resources outside of themselves, people who can't and won't go it alone; it means to know your need of God; it means blessed are those who are not self-sufficient, and blessed are those who do not take themselves and their own ideas too seriously. To be poor in spirit means to be rich in wisdom. As has been said of many of many of us who find ourselves in positions of leadership: he ended up having a station beyond his ideas!

And blessed are those who mourn does not mean blessed are the bereaved, but blessed are those who cry out against the sorrows and injustices of the world and have, because they are poor in spirit and rich in wisdom, a vision of what the world could be.

And blessed are the meek does not mean weakness or timidity, but obedience to a higher agenda: and throughout human history we have seen the meek inherit the earth. Isn't that what happened to Abraham Lincoln, Nelson Mandela, Martin Luther King, Vaclav Havel, Aung San Suu Kyi, Chad Varah, Cecily Saunders and many others: they never stopped believing in the cause that had been laid upon them; they cried out against the injustices of the world; they were obedient to a higher agenda; they lived to see great change; they hungered and thirsted for what is right and they were filled.

And because we know our need of God we try to be merciful to others, precisely because we know how much we need mercy ourselves. We try to live lives of goodness and purity, for that is the way we will see God. We strive for peace, knowing that when we make peace, either in small ways in our families or communities, or in the difficult, tetchy and complicated negotiations that go on in Council Chambers and other meetings large and small, and even on the international stage where people's lives and liberty are at stake, we are most like a child of God.

Finally, to live this sort of self-forgetful life of service – the life we see in Christ and the life Christian people aspire to - we know there will be a cost, and that cost is most likely to be misunderstanding, objection and even persecution from others. This is hard enough to say – for it is not a message anyone particularly wants to hear – and even harder to live out. But I hope and believe that these astonishing words of Jesus can be relevant to all human well-being and prosperity, and certainly to all those who serve in public office and know all too well how hard it is to do what is right, especially in those situations where compromise and negotiation is required, where we will have to lose face in order to gain honour. But if you carry on crying out; if you carry on seeking to be poor in spirit; if you carry on being obedient to the vision and the higher agenda and the cause of the common good which got you into this role first place; and if you hunger and thirst for what is right; then I also believe that you will give and receive mercy, discover purity of heart, be a person of peace, and despite the apathy, ridicule, misunderstanding and opposition of others, be blessed and receive your share of the Kingdom. Thank you for the service that you give. It is this we rememebr and celebrate today in this service, as we look to Jesus as the model of our humanity. May your lives and this great county of Essex be blessed.