



Sermon: - 29th January 2017

An alternative truth

Micah 6: 1-8; 1 Corinthians 1:18-31; Matthew 5: 1-12

There was a professor of linguistics who was lecturing to a group of his colleagues from universities all over the world. He was speaking about positives and negatives in different languages. He pointed out that in some languages a double negative, such as, “he didn’t not go to church” becomes a positive, each negative word cancelling the other out, in some languages a double negative makes no difference at all to the meaning of the sentence, and in some languages a double negative emphasises the negative. He then went on to say that in some languages a double positive, such as, “yes, he did go to church”, reinforces the positive, but in no language does a double positive become a negative. Just then a voice from the back of the hall called out in a broad Glasgow accent, “Aye, right!”

“Aye, right!” We might feel like responding, “Aye, right!” when we hear the Beatitudes read. In fact the eminent 19th-century Danish theologian, Soren Kierkegaard announced over lunch one Sunday that no one was listening in church that morning. Why did he think that? He had read the beatitudes and no one had laughed. He concluded, therefore, that no-one had been listening because he said, “How can you listen to the beatitudes and not laugh?” After all, they don’t really make any sense do they?

We have heard much over the past week or so about alternative truths, alternative facts. I think the Beatitudes fit into that category, although I hope with more claim to be true than some of the alternative facts that we have heard of late. However there is no doubt that they are not an obvious kind of truth; or at least some of them are not. Blessed are the poor in spirit, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven? Blessed are the meek, for they will inherit the earth? And even: Blessed are the merciful, for they will receive mercy? Really?

Is that how the world works?

It’s illogical. And Paul points this out in the passage from Corinthians although it is not necessarily obvious to us reading in translation, and with the benefit of years of biblical exegesis. In the original Greek the words, “the message about the cross” would sound extremely strange to both Jews and Greeks of the time. This is because for Jews, the Greek word “logos”, which is translated as “message” in this passage, was the word which

referred to the law and Wisdom, while for Greeks, logos signified reason and logic, and indeed represented the very reason and logic behind the way the universe works. To suggest that the cross, an instrument of torture and execution, was connected in any way to the Jewish law and the Jewish wisdom tradition or was the reason and logic behind the universe was a contradiction in terms to Jews and to Greeks alike and would have been offensive to both of them. This contradiction, however, is exactly Paul's point. It doesn't make sense. The message about the cross is confusing and puzzling to the wisest of people, yet it does make sense to those who are not necessarily wise in the way that the world counts wisdom. So what appears as foolishness (1 Corinthians 1:23) is really "the power of God and the wisdom of God" (1 Corinthians 1:24). The cross doesn't make sense, the Beatitudes don't make sense. They are, in a sense, alternative facts... This is not how the world works, and that, of course, is the point!

This is Jesus' manifesto, his call to action, his mission statement, and his view of how the world should be, could be, will be when we follow him. The Beatitudes are a call to be church, a call to action, a call to make Jesus present and visible and real. They are a call to be the answer when the powers of this world try desperately to silence those who speak the truth.

Martin Luther King Jr., in his open "Letter from a Birmingham Jail", writes this: "There was a time when the church was very powerful -- in the time when the early Christians rejoiced at being deemed worthy to suffer for what they believed. In those days, the church was not merely a thermometer that recorded the ideas and principles of popular opinion; it was a thermostat that transformed the mores of society... If today's church does not recapture the sacrificial spirit of the early church, it will lose its authenticity, forfeit the loyalty of millions, and be dismissed as an irrelevant social club with no meaning..." King was a prophet, and there are signs that what he predicted is dangerously close to happening, but his prophecy has not yet come true entirely. The church may be seen as irrelevant by many but by many others it is still strikingly relevant. It is relevant to those of us here this morning but what about those of our friends and neighbours are not here this morning; is it relevant to them? In answering the call of Jesus it is our responsibility to make it relevant here in this place. That's a scary prospect but one of the ways we do that is by taking on board this manifesto that Jesus gave us in the Beatitudes. A manifesto that describes a world where the weak are supported, the lonely are befriended, the helpless are assisted, the grieving are comforted, the oppressed are given justice.

Holocaust survivor and political activist, Elie Wiesel died just a few months ago, but in his 1986 Nobel Lecture he said, "There may be times when we are powerless to prevent injustice, but there must never be a time when we fail to protest." And in a sense that is what the prophet Micah tells us. What does the LORD require of us? Not sacrifices, not religious rituals, not going through the motions. Rather that we do justice, and love kindness, and walk humbly with our God. God does not want a specific type of offering; he will accept anything we are prepared to give him. God wants a specific type of person, and this is where the three passages come together and where the Beatitudes help us to see what the prophet was talking about, because they tell us something more about the type of people God wants in this radical new kingdom that Jesus came to establish. This kingdom that doesn't make sense to the world, but in fact is the only sense that there is.

So what does it mean to be poor in spirit? What does it mean to be meek, to be pure in heart, to be persecuted for righteousness sake? What does it mean to hunger and thirst after righteousness? What would the church look like if it was full of that kind of people?

A friend of mine preached a sermon on the Beatitudes which basically rewrote each line in a way which explained it for a modern audience. With apologies to Doug for paraphrasing his thoughts, here are the Beatitudes for today:

Blessed are those who know they have much to learn, who know they fall short, who know they get it wrong sometimes, who know they need God: Blessed are the poor in spirit for theirs is the kingdom of heaven.

Blessed are those who love enough to hurt, who have taken enough risks that they have some regrets, who try, and try, and try again, through blood and sweat and tears: Blessed are those who mourn for they shall be comforted.

Blessed are those who care, who listen, who know when they have enough and are not greedy for more, who know they need other people: Blessed are the meek for they shall inherit the earth.

Blessed are those who shout at the television during political debates, who stand up for what they believe in, who use their vote for the common good not just selfish gain, who are happy to pay taxes which support the health service, education, social services. And in

today's political climate we need this more than ever. Blessed are those who hunger and thirst for righteousness for they will be filled.

Blessed are those who don't hold grudges, who give second chances, who know that they have a log in their own eye and are prepared to overlook the speck in their brothers: Blessed are the merciful for they will receive mercy.

Blessed are those who accept themselves, with all their faults and failings, who can be content, who rejoice in the success of others, who think for themselves and don't go with the crowd: Blessed are the pure in heart for they shall see God.

Blessed are those who know that the truth is never one-sided, who love their neighbours, even the ones they haven't met yet, who open their hearts and their minds to the stranger, who take time to walk a mile in another's shoes: Blessed are the peacemakers, for they will be called children of God.

Blessed are you, when you are loving, content, patient, kind, faithful, gentle. Paul tells us, there is no law against these things! The problem with the Beatitudes is that it tells us we are blessed we are these things but it doesn't tell us how to be these things. But I don't think it's so very difficult to be these things once we understand what they mean. Because at heart the Beatitudes are about the same thing that Micah tells us God wants, that the commandments are about, that Jesus came to show us. It's about being people who love God, who love one another, and who love ourselves, and the more we can do that the more the kingdom will be born in us, in this church, and in this place.