



**GRAY'S
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Sermon at Gray's Inn Chapel on Sunday 29th October 2023 – All Saints

Revd Stephen Baxter

Text: Matthew 5:1-12

As Moses ascended Mount Sinai to receive the law, Jesus, the new Moses, ascends the mount to deliver the essential blessings of and responses to his new covenant.

Mahatma Gandhi first encountered the bible while aged 18 in London and was especially struck by the Sermon on the Mount and its teachings inspired his fundamental principle of non-violent resistance. Gandhi's reflection on the sermon on the Mount continued throughout his life. Gandhi, however, believed that Christians especially in the West had clearly turned from the essence of the Sermon...he observed that much of what passes as Christianity is a negation of the Sermon on the Mount. It's a conclusion that is regularly heard throughout history – why do those who claim to be Christians fail to live by the teachings of Jesus.

The Greek word translated through Latin as beatitude is Makarios. Its original Greek meaning is “free from daily cares and worries” or prosperous. As used by Homer and Socrates it refers to the blessed state of the gods who neither toiled nor suffered. I think that this helps us to see the beatitudes as not required behaviours for admission to the kingdom Jesus inaugurated, but as gifts or blessings that flow from membership.

The first is the key pivotal blessing which triggers the flow of the others –Blessed are the poor in Spirit. So who are the poor in spirit? We may be tempted to think that applies to others...probably not me. We increasingly measure ourselves...time management/billing systems...fitbits measuring steps, exercise, heartbeat and sleep.

My wife often will walk round and round the living room in the evening to avoid her master the fibit from admonishing her from failing to reach the requisite 10000 steps.

I might perhaps quietly think spiritually I'm scoring reasonably well – church attendance, prayer, biblical study, not as highly as some but perhaps upper second quartile, B+?? But that's exactly the view of the Pharisee in Luke 18 who gives thanks that he's not like the Tax collector. But the Tax collector who beats his breast and pleas God be merciful to me a sinner – he is the one who Jesus declares is justified – made right with God.

He accepts that he is spiritually poor and totally reliant on God. And so we must accept that we spiritually can't help ourselves through our own efforts...can't make things right with God. We must accept that any good that we do is a combination of using what God has given and the orchestration of the Holy Spirit; and accept that, certainly in my case there is much regrettable darkness, that thankfully we don't have time to discuss.

Rowan Williams, the former Archbishop of Wales, very much wearing his Welsh hat or mitre delights to quote the anonymous saying that An Englishman considers himself a self-made man, and thereby relieves the Almighty of a dreadful responsibility. Our conditioning from the world and commerce may encourage to us to celebrate an element of self-making.

Acceptance that we can't help ourselves, that we can't right our relationship with God, that we are fully reliant on God....such acceptance is the first blessing or gift and gives membership to the kingdom Jesus has introduced. This then enables us to receive the other blessings as we follow the patterns of the activity of Jesus, mourning darkness and injustice, being meek, yearning for righteousness, being merciful, being pure in heart, being peacemakers, being open to suffering for the sake of being righteous. Such are the patterns of the activity of God.

Gandhi correctly identified that, in order to drink deep of the fountains in the Sermon on the Mount, they (Christians) have to take sack-cloth and ashes. Repent and accept absolute reliance.

Many aspects of the Sermon on the Mount have of course become incorporated within accepted core Western values. We may often hear people say I follow the teachings of Jesus but don't subscribe to the idea of him as the Son of God. But acceptance of the beatitudes and the demands of the Sermon on the Mount and their authority can't be understood or applied in a vacuum. The teachings only be understood in the context of faith a relationship with Jesus, who personifies the beatitudes and who will forgive us, restore us and inspire us to start again when in our feeble struggles we consistently keep falling short of such teachings.

We celebrate All Saints to celebrate the lives and inspiration of those who have gone before us; to celebrate the crucial connections between us the church militant and the church triumphant. Saints named officially by the church or not; Saints who were real, flawed, textured humans. Saints who were driven by their reliance on God. Saints who have contributed to the DNA of our church. Saints who with their human imperfections have glowingly displayed the beatitudes and have showed how the church should live the Sermon on the Mount. Their stories are our stories.

Some of the stories may be more difficult to relate to, such as St Simeon Stylites who sat on top of a pillar for 37 years near Aleppo. Two examples of saintly lives closer to home are Bishop How and Maria Slobtsova:

1. Bishop Walsham How, who wrote our fabulous opening hymn, worked as a bishop in the East End of London, much of which in the late C19 in the words of one writer, "a squalid labyrinth, with half a million people, and Every fifth house was a gin shop. " How revived church work, founded the East London Church Fund and a community of deaconesses committed to East End work. Walsham How also provided religious instruction to and confirmed Joseph Merrick, whose cruel stage name was The Elephant Man How was then promoted to become the first bishop of glorious Wakefield where he continued his work with the poor and representing miners. This is the church in saintly action

2. Maria Skobtsova, born in Latvia, once a committed atheist and Russian revolutionary who became Mother Maria of Paris, the beer drinking, smoking nun who held theological discussions/pretty lively parties, served the poor and then protected Jews in Paris. She was arrested by the Gestapo and continued her ministry in Ravensbruck concentration camp before her death in the gas chambers.

So we give thanks for the cloud of witnesses who have shown us the way – shown us their need for and reliance on God and shown us how to live the beatitudes. And we give thanks for all living saintly lives now, especially at this time, all Christians working in the mind-numbing conditions in Gaza, including the Anglican community running the al-Ahil Arab hospital devastated by the rocket strike.

In the name of Jesus, Amen.