

Cross-eyed

This morning we ascend with Jesus up a mountain in the region of Israel known as Galilee, and we listen to the introduction to one of the great sermons of all time, what we call the Sermon on the Mount. Often seen, rightly, as expressing the very heart of Jesus' message, the sermon begins with what is known as 'the beatitudes', a list of those who are encouraged to see themselves especially blessed by God, despite having very little sense of being blessed in the eyes of the world.

Before going with Jesus up that mountain, however, I want to take you to another mountain, one in Israel's distant past, and to a man called Moses who ascended that mountain in order to receive a Law, a Law by which God's people were to live. Now, Moses was part of a great liberation struggle. His people, the Hebrews, had been slaves in Egypt, oppressed by a tyrannical ruler known as Pharaoh who used them as slave labour to fuel the mighty, relentless Egyptian economy. And the Hebrews slaves were just some of those who groaned and sighed as they were exploited and oppressed by Pharaoh's obsessive, repressive programmes and projects. But God heard their cries and led them out of slavery and brought them to this mountain and there they were given a Law to live by. It's a law that begins with a series of commands known to us as the ten commandments and they are often seen as an essential ethic for living wisely and well. What we have to understand however is this backdrop to the 10 commandments, the context in which they are set, the fact that they were given to a people who had just endured the dehumanisation of life in Egypt. And the 10 commandments have to be understood therefore as counter-commandments, alternatives to the ways of Egypt, defying Egypt. Those liberated slaves were being shaped into a nation that would offer an alternative to Egypt. So each commandment is a renunciation of the commands by which life is lived in Egypt and each command therefore undermines and delegitimises a destructive order that diminishes life.

So to Matthew's Gospel and Matthew is very clearly presenting Jesus as a new Moses who is gathering together a new people of God. And just as Moses went up the mountain to receive a Law which would subvert the ways of Egypt, so Jesus now ascends the mountain to give his people a new law, a new way of life which would defy and subvert the order of his day. The setting of

this sermon is an occupied country, under Roman rule, dominated by a religious elite who were in collusion with the Roman occupiers, and where people were ruled by the power of empire and mammon and policed by violence. And Jesus is telling his new people of God that they are going to live differently. They are going to live in a way that turns the ways of the empire upside down and inside out. And we have to gasp this if we are going to understand the sermon on the mount and our passage today. The empire didn't have much time for the poor in spirit – they were losers. The empire left a lot of people on the underside of society mourning for life could be brutal. The empire didn't have much place for the meek: they were the weak, as were peace-makers, as were the merciful. Those who hungered and thirsted for righteousness were often on starvation rations for righteousness and justice could be scarce. And Jesus comes along and throws everything up in the air and says in effect – well, that's the way of the empire, but in God's Kingdom it's otherwise. Under God's rule priorities are different and the poor in spirit are blessed, as are those who mourn, as are the meek, and those who hunger for justice, as are peace-makers, as are the persecuted, as were the merciful.

So the sermon on the mount is not just a manual for living. Like the 10 commandments it's a counter-manifesto, an ethic of resistance. And later in the sermon Jesus tells us that if we live this way, if we live at odds with what is too often the way of the world, then we will be like salt and light: salt that brings flavour to the world and light that shines in dark places. And this brings me to three features of this sermon.

The first feature is that this sermon changes us. We might say it converts us for it teaches us to read the world differently, to reimagine the world as God sees it. When God looks at the world God sees not the powerful strutting their stuff and the financial markets wheeling and dealing. God's focus is on those who often don't make much noise or who are silenced: the meek, the peace-makers, those thirsting for justice and so on. Here is God's base for working in the world and these therefore are the blessed, and what appear to be lost causes are worth sticking with.

One rather strange feature of last year, 2106, was a craze for clowning that erupted in the UK. Suddenly people were dressing up as rather creepy, malign clowns and jumping out and terrifying people. What was forgotten in that craze is that there is a long historical association between Christianity and clowning, whereby many of the symbols associated with clowns have Christian

meanings. So, for example, painting crosses on your eyes symbolises learning to look at the world through the cross. And when you do that you see it very differently. And of course clowns were subversive characters. They spoke truth to power and by their foolish antics often mocked authority. And so Paul in that great reading from 1st Corinthians this morning speaks of God's foolish wisdom which subverts the wisdom of the world, the folly of God that is wiser than human wisdom. And that apparent foolishness comes to a head in the crucifixion where we discover that this Kingdom that is upon us is centred on a crucified Messiah. Here, in Jesus, we see the one who was poor in spirit, the one who wept over the world and who was gentle and merciful and a peacemaker who hungered for justice and right. And the world crucified him because that is what it does to such people. Yet this crucified one presides over his kingdom which is breaking into the world. And so suddenly the world looks very different. You view it with crosses upon your eyes. You become cross-eyed and you see things differently and you are called to a way of living that appears to be sheer and utter folly.

So up there on the mountain the first thing that you learn from this sermon is that it involves conversion, a change in the way you see things and therefore in the way you act. But the second thing is that it involves inversion. The world as seen through Jesus' eyes in this sermon, the world as viewed by Paul through the cross, is an inverted, upside-down one. It bears the imprint of God's Kingdom where the crucified one, despised and humiliated, is raised to the heights; and those who are last, the stragglers, find first place; and those who do not fit are welcomed and honoured. This is the upside-down, topsy-turvy kingdom .

Returning to the clown theme, St Francis of Assisi who might be said to embody many of the beatitudes, called his followers 'les jongleurs de Dieu', literally the acrobats of God, and they were named after a legendary monk who was despondent because he couldn't think of an offering to bring to God as the other monks did. He was however a juggler and an acrobat, and one day in desperation he did all that he could, juggling and tumbling – and then he stood on his head in front of a statue of the Virgin Mary. And suddenly he realised that for the first time he was seeing the world through God's eyes – upside down. And, paradoxically, that upside down view is the view from the mountain. It's the view that prompts blessings on the least likely people who

are farthest from the power-centre of the empire but who are closest to the heart of God's Kingdom.

So, up on that mountain you listen to this sermon which converts and inverts – and, lastly, which subverts. You see, what Jesus is teaching here is not self-help. It's not therapy. It's not about living more successfully in the world – it's about subverting the world. Our passage from 1st Corinthians tells us that 'God chose what is low and despised in the world, things that are not, to reduce to nothing things that are'. Other translations refer not to bringing to nothing things that are but to 'overthrowing the existing order'. Now that is radical – and the call of the Beatitudes and the call of the Sermon on the Mount is nothing less than a call for a community which will live this alternative way and thus challenge and overthrow the existing order – today's Egypt. And I wonder if maybe like me you are feeling increasingly concerned about 'the existing order' and how it's shaping up right now. I don't want to go on and on about the new Presidency in the United States but it does concern me that what is happening there is symptomatic of a growing order in the world that is deeply hostile to the ethic of the Beatitudes and the Sermon on the Mount. It seems that the emerging order is one that has little place for the poor in spirit – the vulnerable – and the meek. There is a hardness about this new order, a harshness, a lack of grace and compassion and generosity. What are the dangers when the world is run by mega-wealthy businessmen? This is an order in which we were told last week that torture is justified and that we must fight fire with fire and this is surely no place for the peace-makers and for those others singled out for blessing by Jesus. And all this is a call for the church to rediscover this manifesto given it by Jesus.

I'm reminded of a sermon preached by Martin Luther King over 50 years ago, called Transformed Non-Conformists which is as relevant today as ever. King says, 'Our planet teeters on the brink of atomic annihilation; dangerous passions of pride, hatred and selfishness are enthroned in our lives; truth lies prostrate on the rugged hills of nameless calvaries; and men do reverence before false gods of nationalism and materialism. The saving of our world from impending doom will come, not through the complacent adjustment of the conforming majority, but through the complacent maladjustment of a non-conforming minority.'

That is the heart of the Sermon on the Mount with its blessings upon those of little account in the existing order. It is a call for a community, like our

ancestors who came out of Egypt, who dance to a different tune and resist. The sermon offers us conversion, inversion, subversion. It offers a cross-eyed view of the world and a foolish, upside-down way of life. The current clamour in our world throws the sermon into stark relief and calls us to live it. Amen.

O gracious and loving God,
eternal and sovereign one,
invisible and intangible God
who has come amongst us in the skin and bone
and the flesh of Jesus of Nazareth,
we praise and worship you.

O God,

How are we to make sense of a universe Maker who has become a
Creature?

How are we to grasp an immortal God
revealed in a crucified criminal writing on a cross?

How, O God, are we to believe such foolishness?
All we can do is take off our shoes and worship,
for we find ourselves on holy ground.

O God

forgive us that we prefer the comfortable wisdom of the world to your
strange ways.

You have shown us what is right.

You have shown us how to live rightly and justly
and to walk humbly with our God.

Forgive us that we follow other ways
that appear right through the eyes of the world
but which are folly in your sight.

We acknowledge and confess to you our sins
and the sins of the world ...

O God,

Who in Jesus Christ proclaimed forgiveness
with his dying breath,

reassure us of your grace and mercy,
and give us strength to align our lives with your realm
come upon us in Jesus of Nazareth.

In his name we pray. Amen.