



**5<sup>th</sup> November 2017**  
**Revelation 7.9-17**  
**Matthew 5.1-12**

**Life and Death, Hope and Love**

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*Gracious God – we open the bible and long to receive your word – open, we pray, our minds and hearts to receive that word with all its comfort and in all its challenge. Amen.*

All Saints Day fell this year on Wednesday, the day of our Elders' Training.

As always it was followed on Thursday by All Souls Day and preceded on Tuesday by Halloween.

At the Manse four lots of Trick or Treat groups called, eager to scare us and ask for sweets in the process. Last year one of our sons wrote a notice to be placed next to an empty bowl that said – Sorry all sweets gone, even though we hadn't been pre-planned enough to get any in the first place. It was a sad sight!

And all of this at one of those transitional moments of the year. A time when golden and red leaves fall to the ground and the air starts to have a cold bite that tells us we can no longer hang on to an Indian summer, we have definitely moved into autumn days.

That sense of the 'in-between' seems somehow appropriate for All Saints Sunday as we remember the passing of family and friends and how they once shared a journey with us and now – in the words of an ancient prayer, 'dwell upon a distant shore in a greater light'.

A few weeks ago, shortly after his shop had opened, the new Undertaker on Woodside Road came to see me to introduce himself. And as we chatted he told me the very day he opened four Civil Celebrants called to see him to introduce themselves and offer their services. In his view it felt as if it was done with unseemly haste!

Civil Celebrants are a growing trend at funerals. Nothing in law says the service needs to be taken by a Clergy Person.

It made me ponder afresh what it is that we Christians have to say at funerals which is different from what a Civil Celebrant might offer?

Well, today's Lectionary readings for this particular Sunday of the Christian Year take us to Revelation and Matthew, and perhaps they give us a clue.

The Matthew passage has the opening of what we call The Sermon on The Mount. This was the first of five long discourses given by Jesus in the Gospel of Matthew and it's one of Jesus' most famous 'sermons'. Richard Rohr, the much- respected Catholic writer, calls it: Jesus plan for a new world.

And it's certainly full of symbolism that echoes the opening chapters of Israel's history.

Jesus, in today's passage, is presented as a new Moses. He even goes up a hill, just as Moses ascended Sinai.

That's because in Jewish imagery mountains are special meeting places with God. So, if this is The Sermon on The Mount, then Matthew is saying to us, 'listen up – these are important words'.

And, of course, there's that charming detail that, unlike today's preachers who stand in pulpits or on platforms, teachers in Jesus' day, Rabbinic preachers, always taught sitting down. It's part of the reason why Professors at universities are said to have a 'Chair'!

Now, each of the Beatitudes, including the one about those who mourn, which makes it appropriate for today, begins with the word Blessed, in Greek, Makarios.

Makarios seems like one of those bible words which can't quite be translated into English without losing some of the depth of meaning it originally communicated.

Some translations have it down as 'happy'. Are those who mourn the loss of a loved one really happy?

Most versions start each beatitude with the phrase 'Blessed are those...' Well, are those who are persecuted really blessed?

A new way of reading this passage which I came across this week goes like this: Those who are poor in spirit, those who are peacemakers - they are greatly honoured by God. And I rather like that. Greatly honoured.

Of course, Matthew's readers were used to Beatitudes because people used them all the time. This wasn't a new way of speaking invented by Jesus but an old form taken over by him.

In Jesus' day a Beatitude said something that was self-evident, that was obvious. It might go like this: Blessed are those on a low-fat diet, for they will have healthy arteries.

But that's the point really. Because none of these eight Beatitudes is actually a self-evident saying.

Ordinarily the gentle do not possess the earth, the hungry are not satisfied and the merciful cannot bank on mercy being shown back to them.

So Jesus introduced a shock factor here. He took a common form of speech and used it to say outrageous things.

So, let's think of what's behind the Beatitudes of Matthew 5.

Perhaps it's important to say that the eight categories of people mention here are not the only ones blessed by God. It's been said by bible commentators that these verses are in the indicative not the imperative. In other words, they describe rather than prescribe.

You may feel that not many of the characteristics here are in your personal tool box and there's no need to be hung up about that. This was never meant to be a comprehensive list of those who are blessed with being greatly honoured by God, instead it describes the type of people who are, and

that means there will be others not listed here but who equally receive God's blessing too.

It's as if Jesus is saying to us; This is what my Father's Kingdom looks like – it's full of peacemakers, merciful people, those who are poor by this world's standards but rich in faith and spiritual insight.

Put like that and it all sounds rather gentle and passive, in actual fact the Beatitudes are radically subversive.

It's Jesus way of protesting against the current value systems of his day.

I mean you might have expected them to read:

Blessed are the patriots, for theirs is the reign of Empire.  
 Rewarded are the tough minded for they win at all costs.  
 Happy are the militaristic, for they are taking the world by force.

But that's not how Jesus speaks. He knows how the world works yet he calls for an alternative mindset. This is a new way of seeing, a new way of naming what's important and a new way of being.

The Christian writer, Brian McLaren, says The Beatitudes describe a new reality coming into being. It's part of the topsy-turvy, upside down world view that is at the centre of the Gospel.

In a world obsessed with power, Jesus talks of service. In a world longing for success Jesus talks of being poor in spirit. In a world dominated by self-interest Jesus talks of prioritising mercy shown to others.

So, what of the second Beatitude, translated in our church bibles as: Blessed are the sorrowful; they shall find consolation, but more commonly known as: Blessed are those who mourn, for they shall be comforted.

It's about loss. About losing someone we love and the gapping emptiness we feel inside now they are absent.

There is a poem that starts: Death is nothing at all – but in actual fact death is a very big thing and often presents us with the greatest challenge of our life.

For Matthew's predominantly Jewish readership family connection meant so much. You might even have been known as Joseph, Ben Jacob – literally Joseph, son of Jacob. So, when Jacob, your father died, it was like part of your identity died alongside him.

Between 2006 and 2009, in just three years my grandparents and parents died one after the other so that now I'm sitting on the top perch. A church member came up to me after the death of my mother, the last of the four to die and said, - he was trying to be helpful, you understand – well, you're an orphan now Ian. And perhaps, upon reflection, he was right.

The second Beatitude is, I think, about a loss of identity.

And that would certainly be true if, in Matthew's time, you had decided to follow the way of Jesus

and in that process your family had disowned you.

In our bereavement one of the challenges that comes our way is that of forging a new identity for ourselves. Although I'm still Richard's wife, Marjorie's husband or Peter's son, there will, from now on be people who no longer see me primarily in those roles or define me by these relationships.

I once heard a lovely interview on the radio of a lady who had lost her husband and whose children had flown the nest, so she took a long sea voyage to America. She was a scientist, although hadn't done much for years, so she wanted to retrace the route taken by Charles Darwin.

One day at dawn she awoke in her cabin and felt compelled to get dressed and walk, before anyone else was up, to the prow of the ship. She stood there as the Galapagos Islands came into view, held up her arms and shouted: Hello Me!

It was as she was rediscovering herself, meeting herself once more as a new phase of life now stretched out before her.

At the beginning of our sermon today we talked about those 'in between' times and bereavement is certainly one of them.

In losing a loved one it's as if we are standing between earth and heaven, between the church militant and triumphant.

On a day such as All Saints Sunday we are glad to hear the words of verse 17 from Revelation 7: and God will wipe every tear from their eyes. We are glad to recall once again that Jesus said to the Penitent Thief crucified beside him: Today you will be with me in Paradise.

We live in the gaps. Yet something of heaven touches our world of today and brings us hope which enables us to live in love.

Well it's a Communion Sunday and every time we gather at The Lord's Table we hear the minister say: Therefore with all your people in heaven and on earth, we sing the triumphant hymn of your glory.

For me it's one of the most precious moments in the service as I call to mind those who have gone before, family, friends, church members, clergy colleagues – together as the Church on earth and the Church in heaven we join our praise together in worship of God.

And when that happens the second beatitude becomes a reality in my own heart: Blessed are those who mourn, for they shall be comforted.

May that be true for you at this All Saints Tide. In the name of the Father, Son and Holy Spirit. Amen.

*Ian Green, Amersham, All Souls' Day, 2<sup>nd</sup> November 2017*