

Study following Sunday November 1st

Prepare: Think about what really makes you feel happy or blessed.

Praise: Spend some time giving thanks to God that he has created us with a capacity to help bring his kingdom closer to those around us.

Passage: Read Matthew 5.1-12

Ponder: Our reading today looks back at the beginning of Jesus' teaching ministry and Matthew's account of the 'Sermon on the mount'. This reading is to accompany All Saints Day - a day for remembering all those who have gone before us, who have trod the 'blessed' path with Jesus.

- Take a moment to remember someone from your past who impressed you as living a life of commitment to Jesus.

Although the crowd are present, Jesus actually seems to be teaching his disciples. He finds a suitable place to teach them, not in a synagogue or other assembly, but on the mountainside, possibly overlooking lake Galilee. These 'beatitudes' (from the Latin word '*beatus*' that means blessed/happy) are well known and heralded by many as favourite bible texts.

- Do you have a favourite or stand-out beatitude?

Although there are 9 statements beginning with 'Blessed...' the ninth phrase is slightly different - notice it is written in the second person (rather than the third) beginning 'Blessed are **you**...'. You might also see that the first and eighth beatitude both have the promise of the 'Kingdom of Heaven' forming two bookends around those first eight phrases. Matthew's 'Kingdom of Heaven' is a reverential way of not using the name of 'God' but is paralleled in the other Gospels by 'Kingdom of God'. It is clear that this Kingdom was not, and is still not, fully actualised on earth, hence the imperative to continue prayer for its coming - Matthew 6.10, Luke 11.2.

- Do you feel blessed? Do you know you are blessed? Some translations use the word 'happy', 'fortunate' or 'enriched'.

There is a strong emphasis in Jesus' teaching of a *future* reality as well as a *present* reality. We can be blessed in the present because of what we will receive in the future. But there is more to the beatitudes than just testifying to the good grace we receive from God, they also help us focus on how we should focus our words and actions now.

- Do you feel able to fulfil any of the 'beatitudes'?

Sometimes the requirements to mourn, be meek, be pure in heart or be peacemakers can seem a tall order. But Jesus focusses us particularly on righteousness - a right relationship with God that leads us to right living with one another. If we hunger and thirst for righteousness, then we are showing mercy, we are in mourning for those suffering injustice, we are meekly recognising that the world does not revolve around us, and in our spirit we recognise our need of God.

- Read Isaiah 61.1-3, 62.2, 55.1-2 for similar themes in Old Testament Prophecy.

Of course the beatitude section closes with a focus on persecution, something the prophets such as Isaiah and Jeremiah suffered. Jesus too, having epitomised each beatitude and lived up to his own teaching, will suffer and die for his message. This will be the reality for us too, just as it was for those who went before us.

- Think for a moment how you may have suffered whilst trying to follow Jesus' words.

Pray: Pray for God's Kingdom to come, and his will to be done, in the lives of Jesus' followers across the world. Pray that we would walk closer to him and be strengthened.

Study following Sunday November 8th

Prepare: Think about a wedding party that you have attended and the different people you encountered.

Praise: Spend some time giving thanks to God that he blesses us with practical wisdom and common sense to make good choices everyday.

Passage: Read Matthew 25.1-13

Ponder: As we read more of Jesus teaching his disciples during that week leading up to Maundy Thursday and Good Friday. In Chapter 24 verse 3 the disciples ask Jesus for some insight into what the future may hold, our passage today is still part of his explanation. Jesus tells a simple story which has some familiar and some unfamiliar elements. Bailey explains that it is told as a parable to illustrate his point rather than an allegory where everything in it has a specific meaning. It begins with a familiar phrase 'the Kingdom of Heaven' but then puts the description in the future with 'will be like' rather than 'is like'

- What is your understanding of the 'Kingdom of Heaven'?

Bailey explains that it was common, in those days, for the Groom to ride out from his family home, where the banquet would take place, to collect his bride. The Groom would then parade around the whole village or town, showing off his bride to as much of the neighbourhood as possible. This can help explain the unknown hour which he would arrive. Weddings generally took place in the hot and cloudless summer, so the party would take place in cool of the evening and into the night.

- Have you every been caught out, unprepared for something? Perhaps a visitor or on a visit somewhere? How did you solve the problem.

It is good to see the place of wise young women in this story of Jesus, an important example of equality. The lamp that the women had was likely to be a bundle of sticks to hold as a torch, the same word is used in Revelation 4 verse 5 signifying the Sprit within the churches. This torch would need dipping into a jar of oil regularly. Each one needed their own jar to ensure they could light the the groom and bride home.

- There is something here to show the need for each person to make their own preparations for the Kingdom, whilst we can stand together as the people of God, He will look at each individual heart for its response to him.

- Read Matthew 7 verse 24 and notice another use of the wise and foolish comparison Jesus ignores the fact that local friends and neighbours would have lent the girls some oil to make his point. The focus event of the whole parable is the arrival of the bridegroom and in this we can see Jesus showing the disciples that he will return but that his return will be surprising and without warning. We also see the Jesus/Bridegroom idea that reoccurs in the final chapters of Revelation (see Rev 21.2, 9, 22.17). The girls did not have to stay awake but they did need to be prepared so that the groom might say to them - 'Truly, I **do** know you'. (See Matt. 7.22 for another use of 'Lord, Lord')

- How do you think we can ensure that the Bridegroom truly knows us?

- What do you understand by the need to keep our oil jars full?

Perhaps there is a link to being filled with the Holy Spirit in order to keep our torches burning, linking to Revelation. If the wise and foolish builders have a well known song, the foolish bridesmaids might also plead a link with one too: 'Give me oil in my lamp keep me burning!'

Pray: Pray for practical wisdom in the church, that we may find ways of maintaining our relationship with Jesus and filling ourselves with his Holy Spirit.

Stephen Partridge 2020 with reference to ideas from 'Jesus Through Middle Eastern Eyes' Bailey 2008, and Ian Paul's 'Psephizo' Blog.

Study following Sunday November 15th

Prepare: Think about the different parables Jesus told and how some seem to be so much clearer to us than others.

Praise: Spend some time giving thanks to God that he is generous and supplies abundant resources for our world.

Passage: Read Matthew 25.14-30

Ponder: Our passage today follows on from the ten bridesmaids' parable and so continues the theme of watching for the kingdom. This parable that has given rise to the use of the word 'talent' in the English language today, but this may skew our understanding of the parable if we are not careful.

- How do you understand the talents and those that receive them in this story?

Recently this parable has been read in a radically new way, heralding the poor third servant as the one who was honourable, whereas the other two could be seen, in the ancient world, as having exploited others for their gain. In this re-reading of the parable the master becomes a ruthless exploiter of others and not someone to be followed.

- How does this new understanding of the story sit with you?

Of course, Jesus was a champion of the poor, as we will see more of next week, and I can see that the harshness of the ending is also difficult to handle. But perhaps we need to re-look at the parable carefully in its context to properly understand it. Firstly it may be helpful to note that, unlike Jesus' parables of nature, his parables with economic background sometimes have a strange twist, such as the master paying everyone the same (Matthew 20.1-16), or the steward who writes off his master's debt to gain favour (Luke 16.1-13). Something else we see here are a number of parallels with the previous parable of the bridesmaids, including a long wait, the final judgement, and the contrast between the lazy and the conscientious. It is also a parable that illustrates Jesus' words uttered earlier in his ministry that 'those who have will be given more' (see Matthew 13.12). Perhaps the most helpful realisation is that Jesus is referring to talents, or bags of gold, as a metaphor, not for our gifts and skills, but the good news of the Gospel, the word of God our Lord and Master.

- Read Psalm 19 verse 10, Psalm 119 verse 72

If the treasure is God's good news then I think this helps us to see that Jesus' teaching is focussed on the 'Kingdom of God'. In this understanding God is a generous God who pours out treasure to his people through Jesus. We see that the servants who were given this great 'wealth' (even the third 'poor' servant was given a huge amount) are the disciples of Jesus - the Church. As Ian Paul points out, the parable implies that if we have received the message of the generous God then we will be transformed into those who take risks and are reckless with the 'treasure' entrusted to us. On the other hand if we have not grasped God's reckless love for us, then we may end up sitting on the treasure we have, not allowing it to transform us or, through us, anyone else.

- Read Matthew 13.1-12

The servants receive treasure just as the soil receives the seed. In places the treasure/seed is multiplied, but in others the treasure/seed is not able to flourish.

- Think which of the servants, or soils you identify with, now and at other times in your life? How might you better reflect Jesus' call to enjoy the 'joy of the master'? (vs 23)

Pray: Pray for those who have received the message of Good news but who haven't yet been transformed. Pray too for those who are sharing the news in a risky way.

Study following Sunday November 22nd

Prepare: Think about the many different people we know, and have known, how different they are, even those from the same family, and how they are all 'made in God's image'.

Praise: Spend some time giving thanks to God that we live in a world of variety, especially seen in nature and creation.

Passage: Read Matthew 25.31-46

Ponder: We now come to the end of the block of teaching Matthew recounts before Jesus prepares for the Passover of Maundy Thursday. Jesus begins our passage using a phrase he often uses to describe himself 'The Son of Man', drawn from Daniel 7.13-14.

- See Matthew 8.20, 9.6, 10.23, 12.8.

Jesus places the Son of Man on a throne, like a king, and pictures him judging all the people. To this Son of Man/King/Judge picture he adds Shepherd - a term used in the Old Testament for the leaders of Israel, not always complimentarily!

- See Ezekiel 34.7-10

Jesus then mentions sheep and goats, and it seems that, for many readers, they have become the focus of this whole passage. The goats seem to get a rough deal but there is evidence that in mixed flocks the goats were so prolific that young male goats were culled from time to time to maintain the balance of the whole flock. Actually, the animals get no further mention as all attention turns to the King and his dealings with the world.

- How do you understand the significance of the sheep and goats?

In verse 35 the King/Judge figure then declares that he was hungry, thirsty, a stranger and naked, and the 'righteous' served him even though they did not realise they were ministering to him. The king then utters a phrase that has caused much debate through the ages - *'the least of these brothers and sisters of mine'*.

- I wonder how you understand that phrase?

It is often read that those described are the poor, but I want to suggest a more focussed group. To be brothers and sisters of the King, of Jesus, we need to know him and do the will of his Father - see Matthew 12.50. Therefore, this would imply that Jesus is speaking about Christians, Christians who are ill, in prison, thirsty etc.

One implication is that we, as Christians, may face those situations too, and certainly those in the first century, and in other parts of the world today, would recognise those struggles. A further implication from this passage is that there will be blessing for those who give assistance to struggling Christians, even if they have not found Christ themselves, for they have responded unselfishly to a need and shown a heart of love. This helps us see that the message is not 'do good to the poor and go to heaven' but something much deeper. The works described are judged worthy because they come from a heart of love, and that love is from God whether it is perceived or not.

- See James 2.14-17 & 1 John 4.16

Jesus, the King and Judge, commends those who have transformed hearts, and whose hearts have overflowed with love to others.

- How might this lead to us seeking to support our Christian brothers and sisters in difficulty, both locally and globally?

- How might this lead us to offer support to others and seek support for ourselves?

Pray: Pray for all who are struggling in the ways Jesus describes, that they may find the sustenance they need. Pray that we would see others' needs and respond to them.

Study following Sunday November 29th

Prepare: Advent Sunday marks the start of a new year in the Christian Church calendar. Each year the set readings focus on a different one of the 'Synoptic' Gospels - Matthew, Mark or Luke. They are 'synoptic' because they recall Jesus' life from a similar point of view. John's Gospel is used for the special occasions and festivals. Think about the part of the Bible you know well, and those parts you do not know so well.

Praise: Spend time thanking God for his revelation through Jesus Christ, and the Gospel writers who recorded it for us to read.

Passage: Read Mark 13 24-37

Ponder: Having ended last year reading Matthew's account of Jesus' final teaching on the end times, we now jump back into the midst of that teaching recorded by Mark. Jesus' cosmic weather report is drawing from some Old Testament prophecy such as:

- Isaiah 13.10, Joel 2.10, Amos 8.9

The sense is not necessarily of cosmic destruction but of the cosmos cowering and fearful before God, its mighty creator. This is followed by a picture of Jesus' second coming, sometimes known as the 'Parousia' from the Greek word for 'presence' or 'arrival'. It seems that whilst his first coming was quiet, gentle and hidden, this second coming will be quite the opposite.

- What, if anything, have you heard about Jesus' second coming?

- Do you think it is something to look forward to, or not?

Jesus speaks of the angels going out to gather in the 'elect', those who have been faithful to God. This links back to God gathering those who have been scattered.

- Deuteronomy 30.3-4, Isaiah 43.6, Jeremiah 32.37

Jesus then begins to explain that although no-one, not even he, knows when these things will happen, there will be signs to look for. All this has created a number of problems for those trying to interpret this passage. The principal difficulty is the phrase in verses 29 and 30 'these things', and a question around whether this refers to the coming of the 'Son of Man' or the events leading up to an event referred to back in chapter 13 verse 14 the 'abomination that causes desolation'.

Clearly the Son of Man has not returned yet, but the 'abomination that causes desolation' is understood to refer to the destruction of Jerusalem, and particularly the temple by the Romans in AD70.

- Read the whole of Chapter 13 and consider the dilemma above. Also note that the motivation to this teaching is the disciples' question in verse 4.

The danger of adopting the 'Son of Man', as the event referred to, is that Jesus then appears to be mistaken about 'this generation' unless that can be twisted to mean something different. So I am persuaded that Jesus is referring to the destruction of the temple, and Mark is recounting a prophecy that would come true a few years later, as Mark's Gospel is usually dated somewhere between AD 55 and AD 65.

All in all, Jesus' focus for us, in the passage, is actually not to ruminate on the when or how of his return, but to be watchful. We need to keep on with our 'assigned task', faithful to our master and Lord. We need to listen for the call at each season and stage of our lives. When Jesus comes again the timing and manner may be a surprise, but what he will be looking for in us should not be a surprise. Our part of the covenant is revealed in the Gospel, in God's word, and in the work of the Spirit in our hearts.

Pray: Pray for all those who are going through difficult times at the moment, those we know personally or have seen in the news. Ask God to bring comfort and peace.

Stephen Partridge 2020 with reference to ideas from the NIV Study Bible and 'Mark' Garland 1996.