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SERMON The Revd Simon Foster

Revelation 7:9-17

After this I looked, and there was a great multitude that no one could count, from every nation, from all tribes and peoples and languages, standing before the throne and before the Lamb, robed in white, with palm branches in their hands. They cried out in a loud voice, saying, "Salvation belongs to our God who is seated on the throne, and to the Lamb!" And all the angels stood around the throne and around the elders and the four living creatures, and they fell on their faces before the throne and worshiped God, singing, "Amen! Blessing and glory and wisdom and thanksgiving and honour and power and might be to our God forever and ever! Amen."

Then one of the elders addressed me, saying, "Who are these, robed in white, and where have they come from?" I said to him, "Sir, you are the one that knows." Then he said to me, "These are they who have come out of the great ordeal; they have washed their robes and made them white in the blood of the Lamb. For this reason they are before the throne of God, and worship him day and night within his temple, and the one who is seated on the throne will shelter them. They will hunger no more, and thirst no more; the sun will not strike them, nor any scorching heat; for the Lamb at the centre of the throne will be their shepherd, and he will guide them to springs of the water of life, and God will wipe away every tear from their eyes."

1 John 3.1-3

See what love the Father has given us, that we should be called children of God; and that is what we are. The reason the world does not know us is that it did not know him. Beloved, we are God's children now; what we will be has not yet been revealed. What we do know is this: when he is revealed, we will be like him, for we will see him as he is. And all who have this hope in him purify themselves, just as he is pure.

Matthew 5.1-12

When Jesus saw the crowds, he went up the mountain; and after he sat down, his disciples came to him. Then he began to speak, and taught them, saying:

"Blessed are the poor in spirit, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven. Blessed are those who mourn, for they will be comforted. Blessed are the meek, for they will inherit the earth. Blessed are those who hunger and thirst for righteousness, for they will be filled. Blessed

are the merciful, for they will receive mercy. Blessed are the pure in heart, for they will see God. Blessed are the peacemakers, for they will be called children of God. Blessed are those who are persecuted for righteousness' sake, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven. Blessed are you when people revile you and persecute you and utter all kinds of evil against you falsely on my account. Rejoice and be glad, for your reward is great in heaven, for in the same way they persecuted the prophets who were before you.

Pretty much every Christian knows the beatitudes. Back in the day, they were learnt by rote, along with the ten commandments, and the creed, and the Lord's prayer. Today, not so much, but they remain an incredibly central part of our idea of what our Christian faith is.

The beatitudes – the eight blessings we've just heard - appear in Matthew's gospel, and in a rather different form in Luke's gospel. They come after Jesus has emerged from his wrestling with Satan in the wilderness for forty days, and, fit for leadership, he collects the disciples from Galilee and begins his healing and teaching ministry. The beatitudes are the first insight we really get into *what* Jesus is here to say.

But on the whole we miss something about the beatitudes. And what we miss about the beatitudes points us to something we too often miss about the whole of this gospel. The thing we miss is this: that the beatitudes are not addressed to people in general. They're not, for example, consolation for those who are struggling, even though we often read, share and hear them that way. They're not a mad promise about a world to come. They're not compensation for poverty or ill fortune in this life. They're not wisdom for those who seek wisdom. The beatitudes get read in all kinds of ways: perhaps I should say misread. But the key to the beatitudes is in **who** they are spoken to.

The story starts with the crowds that have come to hear Jesus. But when he sees them, Jesus marches up the mountain, and starts teaching the disciples. It turns out later that the crowds might be listening in; but Jesus' teaching, and certainly the beatitudes, is not addressed to the crowds: it's addressed to the disciples.

And in the same way, today, they're not for the world: they're for us, for the Christians. They are for us, and they are about us; about the way the Christian community works. We aren't given this teaching so that we can assure, or reassure, non-Christians. It's not **non-**Christians Jesus envisages poor, bereaved, humbled, seeking justice, and ultimately persecuted. It's Christians who, Jesus thinks, will be pure in their hunger for justice, Christians who will be found seeking peace and seeking righteousness. And it's Christians who will be persecuted and slandered.

The beatitudes is the story of one group of people, not lots of different people. The meek *are* the poor in spirit; the poor in spirit *are* the ones who seek righteousness... and so on. That group is the Christians: and no doubt Matthew had his own particular Christian community in mind, for as we read through his gospel we can have no doubt that his own Christian community was one that faced persecution – certainly from the Jewish religion around them, and very possibly from the Roman empire too.

So, the beatitudes, like everything that is important in Matthew's gospel, are selected, curated, arranged and perhaps even edited by Matthew to capture the way in which Jesus had set about making the people who followed him a distinct people. A people who were to live differently. A people who were to follow a different set of rules. A people who

belonged to a different kingdom.

We've heard a lot about this recently, in our gospel readings and I assume in sermons too, especially in Matthew Chapter 18, where we've heard how these early Christians were shaped to be a diligent community, striving to communicate well, to speak the truth to one another, to be forgiving and kind. Even now, after 2000 years of Christianity, the idea of being part of a community that feels its obligatory to tell the truth, obligatory to challenge members who are dropping their standards, obligatory to forgive, over and over again; obligatory not to get angry, obligatory not to have its men look greedily at its women... yes even now this sounds not just impossible but ridiculous. But there it is, in Matthew's gospel. Jesus said it.

And why? Because the world needed it. The world, that God had created, and that God loves. All the animals, all the plants, the whole thing. And above all, the people. The men and the women. The children and the oldies. The black people and the white people. The gay ones and the straight ones. Every last one of them. They all needed to be able to see a bunch of people who loved each other. Who *knew* how to love each other. A bunch of people who could show them that 'the way the world is, isn't 'the way the world has to be.' It was the **character** of this community that was a beacon to those around them. 'You are the light of the world,' said Jesus; 'a city on a hill cannot be hidden'. Your calling, your vocation, is to believe that there is enough time, enough energy, enough compassion, enough honesty; there is enough hope, enough trust, enough love to go around.

It is because of All Saints that I preach this sermon today. When I arrived at All Saints, I was not a Christian. I was a child of the world. What I learnt in 20 years here is that when we come together, when we cluster around God, and Jesus, and each other, a different kingdom comes into view. I have seen people here weep from hope and release during worship. I have seen you sustain each other in love through very hard moments. I have seen grumpy people learn that they don't need to be grumpy. I have seen simple yet profound things: admitting children to communion seems like nothing at all now, but tested this church severely at the time. Step by step this community has challenged itself towards love. This is a community where we do ask, are we hearing from enough female voices; enough black voices; enough gay voices; enough children's voices? It is far, far from perfect, but perhaps it's not how far you've got, but which way you're going, that really matters.

And what you do, you do not only for yourselves. The fact that All Saints has travelled far and is still travelling means that I see just how my new church community, and other communities, can travel; and what some of the steps on the journey are. My time here continues to feed me as I feed other churches. And for that, I will always remember and love this community and this place.