

We are all blessed

Matthew 5 - the start of Jesus' Sermon on the Mount, known as the Beatitudes – is always the gospel reading for All Saints Day. Today is also, of course, our patronal festival, for both churches in Cottenham and Rampton are not named after any specific saint, but *all* saints – those we traditionally think of when we hear the word 'Saint', but also those we might not immediately recognise as saints, including ourselves. Jesus' teaching that day, as the first two verses tell us, was aimed at his disciples, but you can bet that a whole lot of other people also heard what he had to say. Let's have another listen to the passage but this time from the Message translation which helps us to place ourselves in the crowd that day. As I read the passage, see if there's a beatitude that resonates with you, that speaks to how you might be feeling this morning.

When Jesus saw his ministry drawing huge crowds, he climbed a hillside. Those who were apprenticed to him, the committed, climbed with him. Arriving at a quiet place, he sat down and taught his climbing companions. This is what he said:

"You're blessed when you're at the end of your rope. With less of you there is more of God and his rule.

"You're blessed when you feel you've lost what is most dear to you. Only then can you be embraced by the One most dear to you.

"You're blessed when you're content with just who you are—no more, no less. That's the moment you find yourselves proud owners of everything that can't be bought.

"You're blessed when you've worked up a good appetite for God. He's food and drink in the best meal you'll ever eat.

"You're blessed when you care. At the moment of being 'care-full,' you find yourselves cared for.

"You're blessed when you get your inside world—your mind and heart—put right. Then you can see God in the outside world.

“You’re blessed when you can show people how to co-operate instead of compete or fight. That’s when you discover who you really are, and your place in God’s family.

“You’re blessed when your commitment to God provokes persecution. The persecution drives you even deeper into God’s kingdom.

“Not only that—count yourselves blessed every time people put you down or throw you out or speak lies about you to discredit me. What it means is that the truth is too close for comfort and they are uncomfortable. You can be glad when that happens—give a cheer, even!—for though they don’t like it, I do! And all heaven applauds. And know that you are in good company. My prophets and witnesses have always gotten into this kind of trouble.

If we’re not careful, we can view the Beatitudes as Jesus’ command to try really hard to be meeker, poorer, mournier, hungrier ... in order that we might be blessed in the eyes of the Lord. And, as this passage appears each year on All Saints’ Day – the time we honour people who seem so unattainably good – we can end up feeling unworthy. If we compare ourselves to saints such as St Theresa who I quoted at the end of last week’s sermon, then we’d all probably rule ourselves out very quickly as anyone regarded as remotely saint-like. The bar is far too high – why bother trying to reach it? Who can?

But what if the Beatitudes aren’t about a list of conditions we should try and meet to be blessed. What if these aren’t virtues we should aspire to at all? What if something else was happening on the mountainside that day, something much more inclusive than anyone listening had previously encountered? What if the Sermon on the Mount was actually about Jesus’ blessing of the world around him at the time, especially those for whom society didn’t have much time – people in pain, people who were grieving the loss of loved ones, of security, of identity, of certainty about the future? People on the edge of society? People who work for peace instead of profit? People who exercise mercy instead of vengeance? At a time when people thought that good health and riches signalled God’s blessing, maybe Jesus was just blessing the people who never seemed to receive blessings otherwise. Doesn’t that sound like something Jesus would do? Extravagantly throwing around blessings as though they grow on trees?

And who is worthy to be called a saint? In her book *'Accidental Saints'*, the American Lutheran pastor Nadia Bolz-Weber who founded a church in Denver for people on the edge, says, *'It has been my experience that what makes us the saints of God is not our ability to be saintly (good news there!) but rather God's ability to work through sinners.'* She goes on to say that what we celebrate in the saints is not their piety or perfection but *'the fact that we believe in a God who gets redemptive and holy things done in this world through, of all things, human beings, all of whom are flawed.'*

And isn't that our experience? We make mistakes, even the same ones, over and over. We say no when we should say yes, and yes when we should say no. We stumble into holy moments, not realising that they are holy until they're over. We get love wrong, and then accidentally say the right thing at the right moment without even realising it. But what we all are, is people with whom God is still at work. None of us is the finished article - we're all a 'work in progress' - but God uses us, each and every one of us, despite our imperfections. But here's the thing – it's always been that way. You don't have to look hard at any great character in the Bible – those for whom countless churches are named after – St David, St Francis, St Peter, St Andrew, St John, St Mary, St Matthew, St Paul – to find those who got it wrong as much as they got it right.

This week the news has been full of the news of the death of Matthew Perry, the actor who played Chandler Bing on Friends. It was well known before his death that Perry struggled with addiction for most of his adult life, but few knew of the work he did amongst those recovering from alcohol addiction. One man has posted since his death, *'I'm a sober guy for 17 years. I want to say that the night I went into AA, Matthew brought me in. The whole first year I was sober, we went to meetings together. As a sober person, he was so caring and giving and wise and he totally helped me to get sober.'* In addition to helping individuals, Perry turned his former Malibu home into a sober living facility called the Perry House which ran until 2015.

Speaking in an interview just last year, what did Matthew Perry say he wanted to be remembered for? It wasn't his role as Chandler Bing in Friends. He said this: *'I would like to be remembered as somebody who lived well, loved well, was a seeker. And as someone who wanted to help people. That's what I want.'*

Those words from Nadia Bolz-Weber again: *what makes us the saints of God is not our ability to be saintly but rather God's ability to work through sinners.'* And our belief in a God – a redemptive God – who can bring immense good out of situations viewed predominantly as bad.

So, for this All Saints Sunday, a time when we remember and celebrate the lives of those who have gone before us – those who Jesus would bless, maybe we could create some beatitudes for this day, for this place, for this people - ourselves. Because I'd like to imagine Jesus here standing among us saying:

Blessed are those who doubt. Those who aren't sure, who can still be surprised.

Blessed are those who feel they have nothing to offer.

Blessed are those who are spiritually impoverished, who struggle to sing of the presence of God when he feels anything but close.

You are of heaven, and Jesus blesses you.

Blessed are those who have buried their loved ones, for whom tears could fill an ocean. Blessed are they who have loved enough to know what loss feels like.

Blessed are the parents of the miscarried.

Blessed are those who can't fall apart because they have to keep it together for everyone else.

You are of heaven, and Jesus blesses you.

Blessed are those who no-one else notices. Blessed are the forgotten, the unemployed, the long-term sick.

Blessed are the closeted, those afraid to be who they truly are.

You are of heaven, and Jesus blesses you.

Blessed are the wrongly accused, the ones for whom life is hard, for Jesus chose to surround himself with people like them.

Blessed are those without homes, without livelihoods, living in war torn countries.

Blessed are those who know there has to be more than this. Because they are right.

Blessed are the merciful, for they totally get it.

If you are here today feeling any of these things, then know that the meal we are about to share – a meal of bread and wine open to all – is for you. For it is a beatitude meal: the broken, blessed and given body of Christ.

So as you come, behold who you are. And as the blessings Jesus pronounced on the mount so long ago – know that it is here that you become what you receive. Truly blessed.

Amen.