

**Blessed and Blessing**

St. Matthew 5:1-16

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Saints' Day (Observed)

What does it mean to pray, “Thy kingdom come, thy will be done, on earth as it is in heaven.” “Thy will be done” is pretty straightforward—at least it should be. It’s not an anxious prayer, as if God’s will were in danger of not being done if we don’t pray hard enough. No, it’s a prayer for something we know is going to happen. God is sovereign. His will—all the good things he intends for the world in his faithfulness—*will* be done. Our prayers aren’t going to make that true, but in our prayers we express our faith in his sovereignty and our longing to see his will and his plans for this world come to pass. But “Thy kingdom come”? What is God’s kingdom? Is it now or is it future or is it *both* now *and* future? Is it heavenly? Is it earthly? We ask in the Lord’s Prayer that as it is in heaven so may it be on earth. What does that mean? The Gospels are all about the kingdom. Mark and Luke talk about the Kingdom of God. Matthew talks about the Kingdom of Heaven, which doesn’t mean the kingdom is “up there” somewhere. It’s just a hebraic way of speaking of the kingdom of God. Earth is our sphere and heaven is God’s. They’re supposed to be united, to overlap, to be together, but sin—our sin—has divided and separated them. The temple was the one place where earth and heaven met. It was the one place on earth where human beings could go to be in the presence of God. This is why it was so remarkable that at Jesus’ baptism, heaven was opened. For just a moment there at the Jordan, earth and heaven were brought back together. It showed dramatically that Jesus was

the one who would bring back together what our sins had broken apart. In Jesus—the god-man, the man of both earth and heaven—the King had come. In Jesus the kingdom of God, the kingdom of heaven was breaking in and God was beginning the work of restoring his Creation. This is what we anticipate, this is what we long for in faith and hope when we pray: “Thy kingdom come, on earth as in heaven.”

This is what lies behind our Gospel lesson, the Beatitudes, the first part of Jesus’ “Sermon on the Mount”. In fact, the Lord’s Prayer is something Jesus gives us later on in this sermon. But he begins his sermon with this list of people who are “blessed”. But who are they? Well, as much as Israel had failed in her mission to be the light of the world, there were still some people in Israel who really did have a sense of what God had called them to do. There was always a faithful remnant. We see them in people like John’s father, Zechariah, in Mary and in Joseph, in Simeon and in Anna. But the thing was that none of these people were the sorts most people expected to be exemplifying the kingdom of God. Sure, they were faithful in their simple ways, but they weren’t important, they weren’t rich, they weren’t powerful—they were nobodies. They were the people being ground up in the gears turned by the bigshots, whether that was the Romans or the Herodians or the corrupt Sadducees who controlled the temple and the priesthood. And yet it says something that it’s with these people that the Good News begins. And it’s with these people—and the people like them to whom Jesus had been ministering in Galilee—that he begins his most important sermon on the kingdom. Jesus says:

“Blessed are the poor in spirit, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven.”
(Matthew 5:3)

I think we have a tendency to read this and think that what Jesus is saying is that *if* we behave a certain way—in

this case, if we’re poor in spirit—*then* we will somehow earn or be worthy of God’s blessing. But that’s not it. It helps if we go back to Abraham. In Genesis 12 God calls Abraham and he says to him, “I will make of you a great nation and I will *bless* you and make your name great.” The Lord reiterated and renewed this promise to the generations that came after Abraham. This was his promise to Israel, “I will *bless* you” and this was at the core of Jewish identity. When Jesus talks about people who are blessed, he’s answering the question of who belongs to the people of God. But here’s where he turns things upside-down—at least that’s how it seemed to so many of the people who heard him. Most people just assumed that because they were descendants of Abraham, were circumcised, ate the right food, and stayed away from Gentiles that they were “blessed” because they were God’s people. But here’s the thing: the Lord’s blessing wasn’t blessing for the sake of blessing. There was more to the promise. He said to Abraham, “I will bless you...*so that you will be a blessing.*” A blessing to whom? The Lord says to all the families of the earth. Israel was to be like salt, preserving the earth. Israel was to be a light, shining in the darkness and leading the nations back to the knowledge of God. In fact, after these Beatitudes, that’s the next thing Jesus goes on to preach about: salt and light. If you’re not being salt and light, you’re not blessing and are not blessed—you’re not part of the kingdom.

This is what blessing is about. The people Jesus describes here are the people through whom God makes his kingdom known. They’re the people who already understand and are already living the life of the kingdom. He starts with the poor in spirit. I can’t help but think of Mary. When she finds out that she’s going to be pregnant with the Lord’s Messiah she doesn’t get full of herself. There were plenty of people who would have. No, she bursts out into a song of praise and

the first things she sings is, “My soul doth magnify the Lord...for he hath regarded the *lowliness* of his handmaiden.”

Most people expected God to usher in his kingdom by coming to the important people, the wealthy people, the powerful and politically connected people. Most people expected the Messiah to ride into Jerusalem like King David in a chariot with a sword and with an army. Instead he came to a poor young girl. And it was people like Mary, people who were poor in spirit who came flocking to Jesus and in and through them the kingdom of God burst into the world. The humble came to Jesus in faith and he opened their blind eyes, he healed their paralysed legs, he healed their diseases, he cast out their demons, he even raised their children from death. Meanwhile the powerful people, like the Sadducees, fumed that Jesus was offering forgiveness of sins without sending these people to the temple to offer sacrifices. Meanwhile the Pharisees, people who thought of themselves as righteous, were fuming because Jesus was welcoming the unclean and the sinful. But Jesus says that the kingdom won't be found with the powerful or the self-righteous, but with those humble enough to follow the king born in a stable.

The rest of the Beatitudes go the same way. Jesus says:

“Blessed are those who mourn, for they shall be comforted.

“Blessed are the meek, for they shall inherit the earth.

“Blessed are those who hunger and thirst for righteousness, for they shall be satisfied.

“Blessed are the merciful, for they shall receive mercy.

“Blessed are the pure in heart, for they shall see God.

“Blessed are the peacemakers, for they shall be called sons of God.”

(Matthew 5:4-9)

Israel was in exile and the people longed for consolation, but most wanted that consolation to come in the form of a Messiah who would put their enemies to the sword. Jesus says that, no, those who will be comforted, those who will show the kingdom, are those who *mourn* the sins of Israel and who are ready to repent and turn back to God. Israel wanted to inherit the earth, but Jesus reminds them that their inheritance will come not through those who are full of pride, not through those who think they're better than everyone else because of their descent from Abraham or their circumcision or their diet, but it will instead come through those who are *meek*. Israel longed for justice—which is probably a better translation than “righteousness” in this case, but the justice Israel wanted had more to do with vengeance on her enemies and Jesus is saying, again: No. Your hunger for justice will only be satisfied when you are willing to set aside your rights in favour of humility and gentleness. Israel longed for mercy. She longed for deliverance. But Jesus warns that mercy is only for the *merciful*, not the vengeful. Israel longed to see God, but Jesus warns: You will never see God so long as your outward acts of piety are a cover for oppressing the poor, the widow, and the orphan. The kingdom is manifest by those who aren't just outwardly pure, but who are *pure of heart*. And, of course, Israel saw herself as God's son. The people longed for God to vindicate them by establishing them once again as a nation over their enemies, but Jesus warns: If you want to be God's sons you need to show the *peacemaking* character of your Father. You're out for vengeance, you're calling for the blood of your enemies, if you had the chance you'd kill them in their beds and then tell the world that you were acting out the justice of God on the enemies of his people. But people like that will never be sons of the God who seeks not vengeance on his enemies, but offers them mercy and forgiveness

and reconciliation. The violent will never be sons of the God who seeks to make peace, even offering his own life for the sake of their treason.

Everything Jesus describes here was aimed at Israel's failures to be God's people, to be salt and light. God had blessed Israel to be a blessing, but they wanted to keep his blessing to themselves, which is why he'd taken it away and sent them into exile. And most still hadn't learned. But there was this remnant: again, people like Mary and Zechariah and Simeon who were already showing the world what the kingdom was like, people who were already living out the character of God. People whom the world saw as nobodies, but who were in reality already sharing the Lord's blessing to the world. This is what John the Baptist had been about: calling the people of Israel to repentance, calling them to turn aside from their sin, their folly, from their false views of the kingdom so that they would be prepared for the Messiah.

But, Jesus warns, if you are faithful in being the sorts of people who carry God's blessing to the world, be prepared for trouble. In verses 10-12 he goes on:

“Blessed are those who are persecuted for righteousness' sake, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven. “Blessed are you when others 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 so they persecuted the prophets who were before you.”

I expect Jesus was anticipating where his own ministry was headed when he preached these words. He'd already experienced the anger of his own people. When he preached in his hometown of Nazareth the people tried to throw him off a cliff. He knew that most people were not going to receive what he's saying here and he

knew that he was going to be rejected and that he would suffer and be killed. And he knew that the people who chose to follow him would be persecuted too. At the Cross the present evil age was dealt a death blow. In rising from the grave Jesus inaugurated the age to come. The present age is passing away and the age to come is breaking in, but Jesus knew that his people would live in the overlap. God brought salvation and renewal this way for a reason. The people of Jesus' day wanted it to come all at once, but God chose to bring it slowly. People today have the same sort of expectation. They ask how a good God can allow so much evil in the world. But in asking that question, in asking why God doesn't come and deal with evil we're showing the same sort of self-righteous mindset that dominated Israel. We're forgetting that for God to come and deal with evil means that God will not only have to deal with our enemies and the people who cause us grief, but that he'll also have to deal with *us*. We're *all* sinners. And so God sent Jesus to deal with that sin and to inaugurate his kingdom, but he also delays, and in that he gives sinners a chance to repent and turn to him. It also means that those who, in this in-between time, insist on revealing the kingdom through their poverty of spirit, through their meekness, through their mercy, through their peacemaking will face the same backlash that Jesus faced.

Brothers and Sisters, we are called to turn the world upside-down and the world isn't going to like that. But the fact is that the world we confront is actually already upside-down. It's been corrupted by sin. When we exemplify mercy and meekness and peacemaking and purity of heart what we're doing is showing people how the world was in the beginning and how it's really supposed to be—and how, one day, it really will be again. But in the meantime it will fight back. The Jews stoned Stephen for preaching that Jesus really was the

Messiah. Throughout the first centuries of the Church, many were martyred because they proclaimed that Jesus is Lord, which also sent the message loud and clear that Caesar is not—and Caesar didn't like that. And it continues today. Even if we don't face death, we face the pushback and the scorn and the hatred of those who are invested in the gods of money and power and sex and politics, those who are proud and merciless and war-making, those who represent the values of the present evil age will see us as the enemy. And yet, Jesus says, this is good. Blessed are you, for in your rejection and even in your persecution, you are manifesting the kingdom of heaven—you're being the blessing you have been called to be and you have a share in the kingdom.

Jesus goes on in verse 13:

“You are the salt of the earth, but if salt has lost its taste, how shall its saltiness be restored? It is no longer good for anything except to be thrown out and trampled under people's feet.

“You are the light of the world. A city set on a hill cannot be hidden. Nor do people light a lamp and put it under a basket, but on a stand, and it gives light to all in the house. In the same way, let your light shine before others, so that they may see your good works and give glory to your Father who is in heaven.”
(Matthew 5:13-16)

Jesus challenges Israel. She is to be the salt of the earth. She is to be the light of the world. This was Israel's calling, it was her vocation right from the beginning, again, going back to Abraham. God called Israel to be a kingdom of priests and a holy nation. She was called to serve the Lord and to show the world what faith in him looked like—a tiny nation surrounded by great empires, but living faithfully for the Lord and trusting him to take care of her: the new creation in miniature. She was to be like a city

set on a hill. Jesus was thinking about Jerusalem, up on the mountain above the countryside. The Prophets had said that Jerusalem was to a place where the Lord was glorified by his people that the nations would come flooding through the gates to come and meet the God of Israel in his temple.

But Israel had done just the opposite. She worshipped the gods of her pagan neighbours. Instead of trusting in the Lord to care for her, she forged forbidden alliances with the nations. Instead of trusting in the Lord she trusted in horses and chariots. She did everything in her power to make herself and the God to whom she bore witness a laughingstock amongst the nations. The nations knew that Israel worshipped a God who was different from all the other gods. The nations knew that Israel was called to be different. But when they saw Israel's unfaithfulness they mocked the God they should have praised, asking “Where is her God?”

Israel was supposed to be like a lighthouse, shining God's light to the nations, but instead she's removed the glass and surrounded the light with mirrors. She prided herself on being a people of light and condemned the people outside for being lost in the dark. But they were in the dark *because* of her refusal to share the light. And eventually her light turned to darkness. She rebuilt her temple after the exile, but the Lord's presence never returned.

Jesus now invites those who are poor in spirit, those who are meek, those who mourn, those who are merciful, those who are pure in heart, those who are peacemakers, those who are ready to face persecution to come and find out what really being Israel is all about. If they will follow him they will be the true or the new Israel. They will share the Lord's blessing with the nations. They will be salt. They will be light, making the Lord

known and fulfilling his call to Abraham.

In the Sermon on the Mount Jesus was issuing a challenge to Israel. But, Brothers and Sisters, it's now a challenge to us. You and I have been incorporated into Jesus and into his new Israel. We have been made sons and daughters of Abraham. And so Abraham's vocation has been passed on to us. We are called to proclaim the King and to make his kingdom known. And we have our own temptations today that lead us away from our mission. We are just as prone as Israel was to forgetting who our real enemies are. We are just as prone to forgetting that God's kingdom is made manifest through mercy and grace. And the Church in every age is always tempted to put her light under a basket, to remove the glass from the lighthouse and to replace it with mirrors and then call ourselves the people of the light while the world perishes in darkness. We are tempted to seek the kingdom through pride, arrogance, bullying, and war as the people of Jesus' day were. We're tempted to compromise the kingdom by looking to the powerful and the connected for deliverance or by forgetting that we are a people called to sacrifice our rights and ourselves for the sake of the kingdom.

But, Brothers and Sisters, one thing *has* changed. Jesus has poured his life into us. He has brought the dry bones of Israel to life by the power of the Holy Spirit. In our baptism we have been freed from our bondage to sin and united to the life of Jesus. Our hearts, which were once fixed on self, have been turned to God. Our minds, which once saw the kingdom as foolishness, have been renewed and set on the kingdom of heaven. That's not to say that we don't still struggle, but this is why Jesus invites us to his Table. Friends, here at the Lord's Table Jesus gives us a foretaste of the kingdom. In the bread and wine our

Lord pulls God's future into the present, in the bread and wine, for just a moment he gives us a glimpse into heaven and shows us the kingdom and he reminds us that we live in faithful hope for that day when every tear has been wiped away and God had set everything to rights. Brothers and Sisters, if you struggle to share God's blessing with the world, if you struggle to be meek, to be merciful, to be pure in heart, to a peacemaker; if you struggle to offer yourself as a living sacrifice, come this morning and be strengthened. Come this morning and have your eyes set once again on the kingdom. Come to the Table today and have your hope restored. Today, as we read in our Old Testament lesson, we are tested like gold in the furnace (Wisdom 3:6), "But lo"—as we sang—"There breaks a yet more glorious day; The saints triumphant rise in bright array; The King of glory passes on his way. Alleluia, alleluia."

Let us pray: Gracious Father, let us never forget that you have blessed us to be a blessing. You have called us to be the salt of the earth and the light of the world. You have called us to live in such a way that the nations, seeing us, will be drawn and come streaming into your kingdom. We confess our failures and pray for the strength and the courage and most of all the faith, not only to live in hope of your kingdom, but to offer ourselves as living sacrifices for the sake of the world. Strengthen us we pray, through our Lord Jesus Christ who lives and reigns with you and the Holy Spirit, one God, now and forever. Amen.