



# LIVING WORD EPISCOPAL CHURCH

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## A Sermon for All Saints' Day

St. Matthew 5:1-12

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What does it mean to be “blessed”? In today’s Gospel we hear St. Matthew’s telling of Jesus’ Sermon on the Mount—or the beginning of it, at any rate. Blessed is this person and blessed is that person. But what does it mean to be blessed? And what’s Jesus really getting at with this list: being poor in spirit, mournful, meek, merciful, and so on? And who is the promise of blessing for? This past Monday I found myself listening to a sermon by one of these woke, “evangelical” guys whose ministry is about walking people through the deconstruction of their faith. If you haven’t come across it yet, “deconstruction” is a trendy euphemism for apostasy. You throw away all the bits of Christianity that you can’t harmonise with the secular world, leaving behind a gospelless gospel—like the security blanket I had as a toddler. I wouldn’t get rid of it, so my mom slowly cut it down, a little bit at a time until all I had was a little bit of fabric I could hold. It wasn’t a blanket anymore, but for some silly reason I still found security in it. These folks do that with the gospel. This preacher was preaching on the Sermon on the Mount and he started out by holding up Mohandas Gandhi as the one man who followed Jesus better than anyone else in the Twentieth Century. Gandhi heard these words of Jesus and faithfully followed him. Never mind that he was also a devout Hindu. This preacher reduced the Sermon on the Mount to a bracing ethic. It’s Jesus teaching us how to be good and, through that, how to make the world a better place. It doesn’t really matter, he said, if you’re Christian or Jewish or Muslim or

Buddhist. Jesus just wanted people to live this way and in doing so, we’ll know the blessings of a better world. He took the gospel and turned it into law. And not even a good law. The Old Testament law—the *torah*—has a lot more gospel to it than I think we often realise. At its heart was that first and greatest commandment: You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, soul, mind, and strength. The God who reveals himself in the scriptures. Not Zeus or Jupiter. Not the gods of Gandhi’s Hindu pantheon. Not Mohammed’s corruption of the biblical God. Only the God who has made himself known through the law and the prophets, the evangelists and apostles, and most of all through his son, Jesus the Messiah. Without love for him, no amount of loving your neighbour as yourself will truly heal the hurts of the world. There is no blessing apart from him—and, more specifically, apart from loving him with all our being.

Why? Because it was our rejection of him that brought sin and death into the world in the first place. Idolatry—whether it’s the worship of false gods or the worship of ourselves—idolatry is the first sin from which all the others and all the world’s misery cascade. This is why God’s gracious plan to set his creation to rights began as he reestablished our relationship with him.

If we look to the scriptures we see that blessing comes through being in relationship with the God of Israel. Specifically—because “relationship” is such a squishy modern idea—specifically blessing comes through being in *covenant* with him. Think of Abraham. The Lord established a covenant with him. The Lord promised Abraham a family and a land and great name. In a word: *blessing*. In return Abraham was to trust him—to live by faith and to give the Lord his allegiance. And, centuries later, when the Lord delivered Israel from slavery in Egypt, consider what he did. He revealed his glory by defeating Pharaoh, his army, and his gods. He

revealed his glory in signs and wonders the likes of which no one had ever seen. And then he met his people at Mt. Sinai. He made them a promise: to make them great, to give them a land, and most important of all, to live in their midst. Their end of the covenant—their promise to God—was embodied in the law. Like Abraham, they were to live by faith and obedience and to give him their full allegiance—to love him with all their being and to love their neighbours as themselves. And not just for their own benefit. The Lord had a greater purpose. He wanted the nations not only to see his glory, but for them to see the blessing that comes through living in fellowship with him.

And so, before he died, as Israel was encamped in Moab and ready to cross the Jordan River to conquer Canaan, Moses assembled the people and reiterated the covenant. “If you faithfully obey the voice of the Lord your God, if you carefully do all his commandments, the Lord will set you high above the other nations...Blessed shall you be in the city and blessed shall you be in the field. Blessed shall be the fruit of your womb...and blessed shall be your basket and kneading bowl. Blessed shall you be when you come in and blessed shall you be when you go out.” And Moses reminded them that this was no mere “duty”. This was no mere exchange of works in return for a declaration of righteousness. This was *grace*. Through Moses, the Lord reminded the people of all he’d done for them. He’d rescued them from Egypt. He’d defeated Pharaoh. He’d done signs and wonders. Their clothes had not worn out. He’d provided every last morsel of food that they’d eaten for forty years. All so that they would know that “I am the Lord your God”. In other words, to reveal his love, his grace, his glory, and above all else his faithfulness—to enter into relationship with them and to give them every reason to have faith in him and to give him their allegiance. To keep the law was to live by faith in the character

and promises of God—to love him in return for his love.

And this theme rings through Israel's history and Israel's scriptures. This is what blessing means in the biblical economy. Think of David's words in Psalm 1: "Blessed is the man that hath not walked in the counsel of the ungodly, not stood in the way of sinners, and hath not sat in the seat of the scornful. But his delight is in the law of the Lord; and in his law will he exercise himself day and night. And he will be like a tree planted by the waterside, that will bring forth his fruit in due season." The prophets use this same language of blessing when they rebuke Israel for having strayed from the Lord. Blessing isn't just some nebulous idea of things being good—as a lot of people use it today. Blessing is about creation—and humanity—being set to rights. If you want to picture "blessing" in your mind's eye, picture Adam and Eve, in the garden, all their needs provided, as they faithfully steward God's creation and live in his immediate presence. Brothers and Sisters, that's blessing. David wasn't posting #blessed on Instagram with a picture of his pumpkin spice latte next to the fireplace. For David it was #blessed with a picture of the tabernacle radiating the visible presence of the Lord in the midst of a people serving and loving and taking care of each other.

This is what we've got to have in mind as we listen to Jesus begin to preach his great sermon in Matthew 5. And we have to remember that it wasn't the reality that Israel knew. This is why the people were so desperate for the Messiah. The world is not as it should be. Israel was most definitely not as it was supposed to be. They wanted to know God's blessing—not just in the sense of material prosperity—above all, they longed for his presence. And so, Matthew writes, "Seeing the crowd, Jesus went up the hillside and sat down. His disciples came to him.

And he opened his mouth 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 justice, for they will be satisfied.

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 sons of God.

Do you want to see God's kingdom, to know him as Father, to know creation set to rights, your sins forgiven, and your tears wiped away? This is the way. And it's not a set of ethical guidelines. Too often we think of it that way. It's *character*. It's a mindset. It's the character and the mindset of men and women who know desperately that the world is not as it should be. But not just that. Gandhi knew well enough that the world is not as it should be. This is, first and foremost, the mindset of people who know the world as it should be is centred on the living God who created and sustains all things and us living joyfully, lovingly, and faithfully in his presence. This is the mindset of people who have that image of Adam and Eve in the garden walking with the Lord in the cool of the day in their mind's eye and the longing of their hearts. It's the mindset of people who have that image of tabernacle full of God's presence in the middle of a people who love him with all their being and their neighbours as themselves.

And so it's the mindset of men and women who are not only outraged over sin and evil and longing for God's justice to fall on the people who have done them wrong. It's the mindset of men and women who know that they've done wrong themselves—

who know their own poverty of spirit. Of men and women who mourn not only the sinful state of the world around them, but who also mourn their own sinfulness and the contributions they've made to the world's sick and sorry state. It's the mindset of men and women who are meek, because they know that pride and selfishness do nothing more than deepen the world's darkness—who know that pride and selfishness are rooted in the very idolatry that drives God to the margins. It is the mindset of men and women who, knowing the injustice and the unrighteousness of this broken world, hunger and thirst for God's justice and righteousness. They long for his return as king to bring an end to evil and to rule with justice, because they know that we can never fix the world on our own and in our own power. It is the mindset of those who have known God's mercy and are therefore merciful themselves. Of those who understand the ugliness of sin and idolatry and run from it, who are pure in heart. It's the mindset of men and women who know the story and know of God's grace and how he loves sinners and desires above all else to be reconciled with them, and so they themselves become peacemakers and reconcilers.

I don't think Jesus' list here is by any means exhaustive. He preached this sermon more than once. I expect he preached some version of it just about everywhere he went and it was a little different every time, which is what we see in the parallel passage in Luke's Gospel, where the list of beatitudes is shorter and a little different. Jesus is describing a mindset using characteristics that resonated with his fellow Jews in that specific time and place. These were the attitudes needed to counter the problems that infected First Century Israel. Notably, these are all characteristics deeply rooted in Israel's prophetic tradition. And I can't help but wonder if he learned this mindset, this character from his mother. She sang her song, the one we call *Magnificat* and sing at

Evening Prayer, when Elizabeth blessed her on hearing the news she was pregnant with the Messiah. I wonder if Mary sang that song to Jesus when he was a boy, because we can hear echoes of it in his beatitudes: “My soul doth magnify the Lord and my spirit hath rejoiced in God my Saviour. For he hath regarded the lowliness of his hand-maiden. For behold, from henceforth all generations shall call be blessed. For he that is mighty hath magnified me and holy is his name. And his mercy is on them that fear him through all generations. He hath shewed strength with his arm; he hath scattered the proud in the imagination of their hearts. He hath put down the mighty from their set and hath exalted the humble and meek. He hath filled the hungry with good things and the rich he hath sent empty away. He remembering his mercy hath holpen his servant Israel as he promised to our forefathers, Abraham and his seed, forever.” Can you hear the echoes?

But that’s not the end of Jesus’ beatitudes. There are two more and I think they give us the key to how this works. In verses 10-12 he continues: “Blessed are those who are persecuted because of justice [or righteousness—the Greek word means both and there’s no easily drawn line between justice and righteousness], for theirs is the kingdom of heaven. Blessed are you when people slander you and persecute you and say all kinds of wicked things about you falsely because of me. Celebrate and rejoice! There’s a great reward for you in heaven. For that’s how they persecuted the prophets who went before you.”

And as we read that we should start to realise that while Jesus is talking about “them”, what he’s also doing is outlining his own vocation and ministry. Jesus would stand weeping over Jerusalem, mourning the unfaithfulness of his people and the judgement that was hurtling towards them like a freight train. He would let

himself be arrested and then stand, unresisting and refusing to retaliate or even to defend himself as he was mocked and spit on and beaten to within an inch of his life. He would, beaten and bloodied, carry his own cross through the streets of Jerusalem and out to Golgotha. His clothes would be stripped from him by the soldiers. And as he breathed his last and died, one of those very soldiers would declare, “Surely this man was the son of God.”

We think that when God comes to set the world to rights he’ll send in the cavalry. Most of the Jews in Jesus’ day thought the same thing. The Messiah would come like David, riding at the head of a great army to crush the heads of the Gentiles. But instead the Messiah went humbly to Calvary. He let sin and death rise up to their full height and strike him down so that when he rose from the grave three days later, he crushed the serpent’s head and overturned the victory of sin and death.

Brothers and Sisters, *this* is how God takes his throne and sets the world to rights. *This* is how Jesus becomes Lord. *This* is how blessing comes. In poverty and meekness, bringing mercy and making peace. And giving his life for the sake of his enemies. Because any other way would simply perpetuate the very things you and I have done to get the world into the mess it’s in.

And now that Jesus has done it, our calling as his people is to keep doing it. As St. Paul says, we’re to have the mind of the Messiah. This mindset has always been the mindset of the faithful people of God and it will be until the mission is one day done. I suppose if he wanted to, God could simply save his people from their bondage, set the world to rights, and set them free to live in it, but that’s not how he does things. From the beginning he created Adam and Eve to bear his image—that means to be his stewards, to act as the priests of his

temple. And so when he delivered Israel from Egypt, he showed the people his glory and gave them reason to love and trust and obey him. He established a covenant with them. He took up his dwelling in their midst so that they would be his light in the midst of a dark world—so that the nations would see and come to give him glory. He made them stewards of his glory and his grace. And, Brothers and Sisters, in Jesus he has done the same for us.

I started slowly reading through Ephesians this week—which might give you a hint of things to come—and the first thing I was struck by in the very first chapter was how, over and over, Paul proclaims the glory of God that has been revealed in Jesus and the Spirit—and that is also revealed in us. I couldn’t help but think how Jesus goes on after the Beatitudes: “You are the salt of the earth... You are the light of the world. A city can’t be hidden if it’s on top of a hill... That’s how you must shine your light in front of people! Then they will see your good works and give glory to your Father who is in heaven. This is what we see at the end of Revelation: the nations seeing the glory of God revealed in Jesus and his church and streaming to the New Jerusalem to worship him. Brothers and Sisters, God’s glory revealed in us, because he’s made us new, and God’s glory revealed by us, as we go to live and to proclaim his new creation.

It is no easy task, but it is the only way to know and to make known God’s blessing. We go out, knowing our own poverty of spirit, but also the riches of God’s grace. We go out meek and mourning, but also knowing the joy of being coheirs with the King. We go out hungering and thirsting for justice, but we do so having experienced mercy ourselves. We go out to battle, paradoxically, with the intent to reconcile. And as we do this, we also transpose this Messiah-like character into the key necessary to

meet our own culture. In a world of ugliness where truth is now defined as whatever we want it to be and politicians try to win our loyalty with lies and appeals to our greed, we go out knowing that blessed are those who hunger and thirst for truth, beauty, and goodness. In a culture obsessed with consumption and debt, we go out knowing that blessed are those who are satisfied with the riches of God. However we do it, Brothers and Sisters, our calling is to go out into the world as light in the darkness, knowing and confident on the one hand that Jesus is Lord and has won the battle, but also going out with the same humility of spirit that took him to the cross. Knowing that when God rides out to war to set the world to rights, it's not with the cavalry, but to the humility of Calvary. So, too, must it be with us.

Let us pray: O almighty God, you have knit together your elect in one communion and fellowship in the mystical body of your Son Christ our Lord: Give us grace so to follow your blessed saints in all virtuous and godly living, that we may come to those inexpressible joys that you have prepared for those who truly love you; through Jesus Christ our Lord, who with you and the Holy Spirit lives and reigns, one God, in glory everlasting.  
*Amen.*