

Reflection for All Saints Day (01.11.20) Revd Steph Nadarajah

Revelation 7:9-end; Matthew 5:1-12

I'll be honest with you. The Beatitudes - as these sayings of Jesus are known - have never done much for me. Over the years, they have felt like a shopping list of spiritual virtues that is always out of reach. And I've found them little help on All Saints Day - reinforcing, as they do, that unbridgeable chasm between the saints and me.

The saints: whoever they might be. I certainly didn't find it hard to call to mind a myriad of individuals who fit the categories of our opening prayer.

The saints who went before us: I thought of the people who've shaped me on my own spiritual journey - the ones who helped me to name my experience of the divine life, and to be drawn deeper into it. *The saints who live beside us* - the ones whose lives hold up a mirror, somehow, to the person of Jesus and all he was, did, and stood for. The ones who make Jesus a little easier to know. *The saints who live beyond us:* the special ones we treasure - Mary the Mother of God, St Francis - and all who challenge us to make God's dream for creation a reality.

The saints - by their very nature - seem to overshadow us with the question that the prophet Ezekiel (33:10) first asked: 'How, then, should we live?' A question that was echoed by the young lawyer in last week's Gospel reading, who put it to Jesus, 'Which commandment is the greatest?' How should we live?

But maybe the invitation of today is a different one. Maybe the invitation of today is to look at the lives we are actually living, and to ask where the Beatitudes speak into that lived experience. And so I say to you:

Blessed are the poor in spirit, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven. Blessed are the agnostics. Blessed are they who doubt. Those who aren't sure, who can still be surprised. Blessed are they who are spiritually impoverished and therefore not so certain about everything that they no longer take in new information. Blessed are those who have nothing to offer. Blessed are they for whom nothing seems to be working. Blessed are the pre-schoolers who cut in line at communion. Blessed are the poor in spirit. You are of heaven and Jesus blesses you.

Blessed are those who mourn, for they will be comforted. Blessed are they for whom death is not an abstraction. Blessed are they who have buried their loved ones, for whom tears are as real as an ocean. Blessed are they who have loved enough to know what loss feels like. Blessed are the mothers of the miscarried. Blessed are they who don't have the luxury of taking things for granted any more. Blessed are they who can't fall apart because they have to keep it together for everyone else. Blessed are the motherless, the alone, the ones from whom so much has been taken. Blessed are those who "still aren't over it yet."

Blessed are they who laughed again when for so long they thought they never would. Blessed are those who mourn. You are of heaven and Jesus blesses you.

Blessed are the meek, for they will inherit the earth. Blessed are those who no one else notices. The kids who sit alone at middle-school lunch tables. The laundry guys at the hospital. The sex-workers and the night shift street sweepers. Blessed are the losers and the babies and the parts of ourselves that are so small. The parts of ourselves that don't want to make eye contact with a world that only loves the winners. Blessed are the forgotten. Blessed are the closeted. Blessed are the unemployed, the unimpressive, the underrepresented. Blessed are the teens who have to figure out ways to hide the new cuts on their arms. Blessed are the meek. You are of heaven and Jesus blesses you.

Blessed are those who hunger and thirst for righteousness, for they will be filled. Blessed are the wrongly accused, the ones who never catch a break, the ones for whom life is hard - for they are those with whom Jesus chose to surround himself. Blessed are those without documentation. Blessed are the ones without lobbyists. Blessed are foster kids and trophy kids and special ed kids and every other kid who just wants to feel safe and loved and never does. Blessed are those who hunger and thirst for righteousness. Blessed are they who know there has to be more than this. Because they are right.

Blessed are the merciful, for they will receive mercy. Blessed are those who make terrible business decisions for the sake of people. Blessed are the burnt-out social workers and the over-worked teachers and the pro-bono case takers. Blessed are the kids who step between the bullies and the weak. Blessed are they who delete hateful, homophobic comments off their friend's Facebook page. Blessed are the ones who have received such real grace that they are no longer in the position of ever deciding who the "deserving poor" are. Blessed is everyone who has ever forgiven me when I didn't deserve it. Blessed are the merciful for they totally get it.

These Beatitudes are not mine, of course - they belong to the American Lutheran pastor, Nadia Bolz-Weber, and you may have heard them before. I make no apology if you have. And I wonder: did you find yourself in that list? Did you find someone else in that list? Someone you know, or someone whose story in the news or the local community has touched your life in some way? More importantly perhaps, how did you feel in this moment of recognition?

Reframing familiar scripture passages in contemporary terms can be both enlightening and enlivening. For me, these reimagined Beatitudes drive home the message that saintliness isn't about moral heroism - either our own, or that of others - but about finding ourselves in the story of a God whose character is revealed in the reversal of our expectations.

We discover, in the Beatitudes, a contrast between the way things seem now, and the reality that God is offering. It's a message we badly need at this time - not just as we move into another national lockdown, but as we reflect upon those other crises of the world that haven't ever gone away. Blessed are those who take their families with them on a boat across the Channel, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven.

And while the Beatitudes may hold up a mirror to our lived experience in the present, inevitably, there is an invitation, too. For each of these blessings comes with a future possibility: a scenario that we are gently beckoned into. There will be comfort, there will be an inheritance, there will be mercy, there will be a homecoming. What is our part in that? Where is God's Spirit moving us, even as we listen to these Beatitudes, and where is the invitation to respond? It will look different for each of us. So, as you sit alongside our Lord Jesus Christ on the mountain, ask him to show you what you need to do.

I'd venture so far as to say that today is not about gazing on the holiness of others and discovering ourselves - in the process - to be lacking. It's about being in the right place, at the right time, as Jesus throws blessings our way. It's about being open to the possibility of bearing witness, in our own lives, to the story of God's upending, extraordinary, extravagant, abundant life for all. With no exceptions.

Amen.