

4th Sunday (A)

1st February 2026

'The Beatitudes ... Do I need to change?'

Zeph 2-3: *I will leave in your midst a people humble and lowly*

1Cor 1: *God chose what is weak in the world*

Mt 5: 1-12 The Beatitudes

The past week has seen significant news on both the conflicts in the Ukraine and in the Gaza, although neither piece of news seems to have been given many column inches in the newspapers — in fact, when I picked up yesterday's paper I could almost no reference to either! And yet, surely, the end of the world's' wars is surely one of man's greatest priorities? We pray that the ceasefire between Russia and the Ukraine may amount to a real and lasting cessation of hostilities, and a chance that peace, ultimately, may be brokered after nearly 4 years of war. From the conflict in the Holy Land, 2½ yrs on from the Oct 7th (2023) attacks, the body of the final Israeli hostage was released this week, and please God phase 2 of the peace plan can now be negotiated, too, and a just settlement be reached for that land which has seen so many decades of violence.

One of the victims of war in the Holy Land has been the pilgrim trade, on which many in Israel and the West

Bank rely — particularly Palestinian Christians — as Holy Land pilgrimages have been few & far between. I had dearly intended to go to the Holy Land again after Easter 2024, but of course that didn't happen. When one goes to the Holy Land once ... well, one just wants to keep going back. I do hope to go again, ... and I pray that you, too, may make it a priority, one day, to go on pilgrimage to the Holy Land to experience for yourself the landscape, and the towns, where Our Lord Himself trod.

In my opinion, of all the places in the Holy Land, one can most easily imagine the events of the Gospel in the *area around Lake Galilee*. The landscape remains much as the Lord would have known it: the lake and the hills He knew so well. It's still very unspoilt; habitations are few; agriculture abounds: bananas, olives, vines. And in a spot just on the hill above Lake Galilee there is a church situated in the middle of this farmland, which is known as *the Church of the Beatitudes*. Whilst no-one knows for certain the location of the Sermon on the Mount, yet somewhere in that vicinity must have been the location for

Jesus's teaching the crowds on the hillside. From the vicinity of the church one has a beautiful panoramic view of the whole region, the fertile plain of Genessaraton, the town of Capernaum, as well as of the Sea of Galilee: the locations of much of Jesus's ministry. The first church to be built there was in the 4th c.: already then Byzantine pilgrims were choosing this site to commemorate the Sermon on the Mount. The present church is from 1939, and is octagonal, representing the 8 beatitudes that we heard there in Matthew's account, and which are the headline message in the Sermon on the Mount.

2000 years on, and the Beatitudes remain as tough an agenda for the Christian as ever ... Jesus asks us searching questions about our behaviour, about our living the Christian life. It is good that we hear them again and again. We might think we know them ("such a familiar text"!) but ... are we yet living them? They turn the values of the world upside down, and remain a real challenge. Let's take them each in turn, and quietly and meditatively allow them to probe our conscience ...

1. *Blessed are the poor in spirit.* Am I poor, at least in spirit? Happy with my income, my possessions, my lot? Or am I continually driven by a need above all else to better myself, to climb, to earn more, to spend, to grow? God's first concern — Jesus's first blessing here — is for the poor, the ones who know they're in absolute need of God to be fulfilled. *Am I poor in spirit?* ... or do I need to change? ... because if you're poor in spirit, you're blessed, says Jesus, and the kingdom of heaven is yours for the having.
2. *Blessed are those who mourn.* Do I mourn, and show sympathy with all those who suffer or are bereaved? Or do I shun anyone who is down a bit, tell them to pull themselves together, get on with it? Do I listen with patience to those in need. Or do I do my best to steer well clear? *Do I mourn?* ... or do I need to change? ... because if you mourn, says Jesus, you're blessed and will be comforted.
3. *Blessed are the meek.* Am I meek and gentle? Am I approachable, and welcoming to others? Or do I play

the bully, physically, intellectually, socially ... happy to throw my weight around a bit ... and get others to jolly well know I'm around? *Am I gentle*, as Jesus asks? ... or do I need to change? ... because if you're gentle, you're blessed, says Jesus, and you'll inherit the earth, the fullness of life.

4. *Blessed are those who hunger and thirst for righteousness.* Do I feel for what is right and wrong in the world? Do I agonize when I see people treated unjustly, and want to do something about it? Do I want others to know God's intention for the world saved in Christ? Or couldn't I care less really? ("I'm all right Jack" / Others can do what they like, think what they like.) *Do I hunger and thirst for what is right?* ... or do I need to change? ... because if you hunger and thirst for what is right, you're blessed, Jesus says, and you shall be truly satisfied.
5. *Blessed the merciful.* Am I merciful and forgiving? Am I the first to say sorry, the first to forgive? Or do I stubbornly insist I was totally in the right? Do I hold

on tenaciously to grudges, ready to bring them out, "but what about the time when you said / did ..."? *Am I merciful?* ... or do I need to change? ... because if you're merciful, says Jesus, you're blessed, and God will show you mercy.

6. *Blessed are the pure in heart.* Do I keep myself pure in heart, in the midst of a myriad of salacious images — TV, magazines, internet, phone — that all tempt my eyes and heart to impure ideas? Do I do my best to use my phone and the internet in a pure way, avoiding immoral things if I come across them? Or am I all too ready to give in, make excuses, wallow a bit in something I know to be base? *Am I pure in heart?* ... or do I need to change? ... because if you're pure in heart, says Jesus, you're blessed: you'll see God.
7. *Blessed are the peacemakers.* Am I a bringer of peace? Do I tend to cool arguments down? Or am I usually the one stoking them up, the angry one who won't let a thing drop? Do I act as the go-between to reconcile others? Or do I just steer well clear, "not

getting involved in that one.” *Am I a peacemaker? ... or do I need to change? ... because if you’re a peacemaker, says Jesus, you’re blessed: you’ll be called a child of God.*

8. *Blessed are those who are persecuted for righteousness’s sake ... and on account of Jesus.* Am I willing to undergo a bit of ridicule for standing up for what I believe? ... and for Jesus Himself? Am I known for my faith? Or do I do all I can to keep it well under wraps, hidden from colleagues and friends? *Am I willing to be persecuted on account of Jesus? ... or do I need to change? ... because if people speak against you on my account, says Jesus, you’re blessed already, and your reward will be even greater in heaven, which is all that really matters.*

The Beatitudes are a *lifetime’s plan of action* ... Whether or not the text feels over-familiar to us, it is good to hear them time and again, proclaimed in the liturgy and coming to us as fresh as the day Jesus delivered them on that hillside above Lake Galilee, ... and reminding us every

single time that — if we abide by these attitudes, these Beatitudes of Christ — then *we shall be comforted, ... we shall see God, ... and our reward will be great in heaven.*

God promised Zephaniah in the 1st Reading: “*I will leave in your midst a people humble and lowly.*” And St Paul said in the 2nd Reading, “*God chose what is foolish in the world ... what is weak in the world ... what is low and despised in the world ...*” He chooses us to model humility, meekness, peaceableness, purity, poverty — the values of Christ, the agenda of the Beatitudes — and not the values of the world, in order to bring about His reign. Am I living with my whole heart these teachings of Christ, set before us with such clarity and regularity? *Or do I need to change? ...*