

All Saints 2017

Fr Peter Groves

Reading:

Matthew 5.1-12

Vision is highly prized in our world. We might think that the ability to see, and the content of our seeing, is something largely taken for granted, but that is not the case. Enquire of any sizeable body or organization, and you will find them desperate to tell you about their vision, usually in the form of something called a vision statement. Often, this will be accompanied by something else called a mission statement, and very few people in the world of strategy or advertising seem remotely aware of just how theological those concepts are. No particular reason why they should, but the same excuse cannot apply to the Church of England, no matter how untheological that may seem from time to time.

In today's church, vision statements and strategies are all the rage. If you visit almost any diocesan website, you will find some sort of tag line. A random sample led me to Birmingham – “Growing churches at the heart of each community” – and to Leicester – “Shaped by God” – and to Winchester – “Living the mission of Jesus”. This last is interesting: the mission of Jesus is the incarnation of the second person of the Trinity to offer the one true, perfect and eternal sacrifice for the salvation of the world. Winchester diocese is clearly nothing if not ambitious.

Sometimes these statements are accompanied by slogans, preferably three word slogans. For Newcastle it's, open, generous and engaged. For Southwell it is, rather unfortunately, wider, younger, deeper. For Ely diocese it's Generous and Visible. And now, for the Diocese of Oxford, it's “Contemplative, Compassionate, Courageous”.

The Bishop of Oxford has chosen these three words to summarise our mission. What does it mean for us to be a Christ-like church? There are various ways in which we can answer this question, and a slogan is helpful for some, but rather more important is the scriptural basis of our life as Christians, and it is for this reason that Bishop Steven has asked us to put at the centre of our Christian lives the words of Jesus which we call the Beatitudes, the words which we heard in our gospel reading.

If we, as a church, can embody the lives of those whom Jesus calls Blessed, then we are surely on the right lines. It is for that reason that, as these ideas have been developing in the diocese, I have been repeatedly reminding my colleagues that while contemplative, compassionate and courageous is all very well, it is easy to ignore a slogan. It is less easy, for a Christian at least, to ignore the Beatitudes.

The body of Jesus's teaching in Matthew 5 - 7 is known to us as the Sermon on the Mount. It's sometimes said that this sermon contains all that we need to know of Christian living. If that's the case, we might go further and say that the beatitudes we find at its outset are themselves a summary of the whole sermon. Here, briefly and simply, we are told who it is who is "blessed": I tend to retain the two syllable pronunciation, blessed, because it demarcates this word – In Greek, makarios - blessed, happy, fortunate - from the English sense of blessed as in having been pronounced blessed by the eulogy of another.

The beatitudes are misunderstood if we think of them as describing a changeless plain of perfection which we are trying to attain. They are better thought of as a process of conversion, conversion which begins with ourselves and then moves out into the world around us. So it is that the poor in spirit are those who - spiritually - are most like the poor, unconcerned with success, possessions

status, acknowledging before God their genuine poverty. Likewise those whom we call the meek. This beatitude is a tiny summary of Psalm 37, Fret not thyself because of the ungodly. When that psalm says that the meek will possess the land, it is referring not to those who are shy and self-deprecating, but to those whom we would call underdogs. What the world sees and what God sees are not the same thing.

Those two groups of the blessed are those who have begun to liberate themselves from all that prevents their journey to God. They offer a story quite contrary to that of human success and strength, and in so doing are perfect reflections of that gospel truth which Paul perceived, that God has destroyed the wisdom of the wise, and shown himself in the folly and in the weakness of the cross. Standing at the foot of the mount straining to hear Jesus is one thing, following him to Calvary is another. Only after we have done the latter can we understand his former teaching.

So, with the cross fixed before our eyes we are able properly to mourn - to yearn for God to such an extent that our very mortality becomes at once a blessing and a source of suffering. It is in the light of the cross that we must hunger and thirst for righteousness and show genuine mercy, abandoning any thought for ourselves, any worldly tendency to weigh pros and cons, to balance our own wants with those of others rather than to give exhaustively and exhaustingly of ourselves. It is by turning to God in this way that we allow him to purify our hearts, to remove from us the trappings which dazzle and distort what we think is our true vision. Such a different and dangerous attitude to our world is a properly Christian doctrine of creation, an acceptance of our limits and of the challenge to overcome them.

The Beatitudes are, for the church, a call to action. This is what happiness, what blessedness, looks like, Jesus tells us. Our response will be an effort to put that blessing into practice, if it is to be any

response at all. On this All Saints Day, I am reminded of the sage words of my friend the Rector of St Aldate's, who objects to the opening words of our first hymn. He says, quite rightly, that it is dangerous to sing about the saints, who from their labours rest. To be a saint is not to rest from labour, but rather to place oneself within that striving for the kingdom to which Jesus calls all his followers. Those saints who enjoy the heavenly vision of glory are far from resting, as they pour out their prayers for us all. So too, our efforts must be rooted in Christ and in his offering to the Father, if they are to be recognisably Christian. But they must still be efforts. Sainthood is an ideal, but it is also a calling, one which we all, to some extent, share. Whether we express that calling with a vision statement, or a slogan or an act of kindness or a silent prayer, if we seek to live out the Beatitudes we will at least be trying to be Christians.