

BUT GOD

Matthew 5:1-12

1 Corinthians 1:18-31

If you settle down to watch a film, or pick up a book which has been described as a comedy, you may not know just what the story will be, but you can be fairly sure of one thing: no matter what horrific situation the heroes may find themselves in, it will almost certainly come right in the end. Quite often such stories pile up the problems one upon the other till you can see no way out for the characters involved, but then something quite unexpected happens, and a happy ending is able to ensue after all.

In many ways the Gospel works like that. There can be all sorts of bad news, all sorts of factors piled up against God's people, but God is more than able to subvert expectations, more than able to turn things on their heads, more than able to bring about an unexpected and happy ending.

BUT GOD. It is one of Paul's favourite phrases. He loves to spell out for his readers all the circumstances against them - whether it is their background of sinfulness, or as in today's reading, their total lack of worldly status in a status ridden town. **BUT GOD**, he then goes on, is able to work best with unpromising material.

Last Sunday evening my daughter insisted that we watch the first programme of Dancing on Ice. I watched the "celebrities" skate out onto the ice and, as usual, I had heard of very few of them - three I think. Now this probably just goes to show my ignorance, but when I see the so-called celebrity papers, like "Hello" in Dentist's waiting rooms and such places (do individuals really buy them, or are most of the purchasers dentists?) I am always amazed at the names and faces I do not know. Often there is no explanation of how a person became a celebrity. It seems that increasingly people are famous simply for being famous. It's a strange state of affairs, but one which the ancient city of Corinth might have recognised very well. The cult of celebrity was alive and well there in the first century A.D. There people achieved fame by their powers of oratory, or their reputed wisdom, or simply by being born of noble or wealthy families. In Corinth you were basically somebody or else you were nobody.

Most of the people were nobodies, of course. And most of the Christians were nobodies as well. **BUT GOD** doesn't need our human rank or our human skill to make his good news known. Far from it. In fact, God is seldom found where human power is greatest. God is not with Herod, in the Christmas story, he is in the stable or with the shepherds. God is not with the Chief Priests or with Pilate in the crucifixion, he is working through Jesus' willing weakness and death. God is not to be found with those who through rank, riches or skill impose their will on another. God is to be found where no one looks for him. He delights in turning expectations around. We may think we are wise **BUT GOD**'s foolishness is wiser than our idea of wisdom. We may think we understand what makes for power **BUT GOD**'s weakness is stronger than human strength.

Paul's point is that it is no accident that God has chosen the nobodies. He does it on purpose to show us his way of looking at the world, to show us what is really important. Jesus' beatitudes work in the same way. What Paul writes to the Corinthian church could be taken as a very apt commentary on Jesus' words. The beatitudes may seem foolish, but that is God's way. God's power is not found in human power nor his wisdom in human wisdom.

This is a hard lesson for us to learn. Just look at church architecture over the centuries. Nearly always it has been an architecture of power, drawing attention to

itself, making sure the church is the most imposing building in a community, often giving the very opposite message than that which Jesus gave.

Last week we read how Jesus gets the crowds by enacting the gospel, showing the light. He does it by calling the ordinary folk, by healing all who came to him, by telling people that this is the way of the Kingdom of God, and those who see it differently need to change their thinking and change their ways. Having done that, having got the people's attention, having made sure that they like what they see now he declares the good news. The disciples (which may not, at this stage mean the twelve, but certainly means those who followed most closely, most persistently) gather around, but you know that he pitched his voice so that the curious could hear as well. What he gives them is a manifesto.

We often think of the beatitudes as a list of things to aspire to, but that's not really what is going on here. Jesus isn't saying try to be like this; he is telling what is good news for those who are like this - those for whom the news is, in the ordinary course of events, very bad. The Gospel is good news, not good advice. Jesus is saying that the world may look down on you, BUT GOD sees things very differently.

The way the world sees the people he names might be something like this:

The poor in spirit, *the world just laughs and passes you by.*

The mournful, *the world cannot keep trying to feel for your loss: your life may be changed forever, but the world spins on regardless.*

The meek, *who will be regarded as doormats and trampled over.*

Those who long for righteousness, *and the world asks "Why?"*

The merciful, *who too often find that those on whom they have mercy turn and stab them in the back.*

The pure in heart, *so often equated as the gullible.*

The peacemakers, *who never end up with the power.*

Those who are persecuted on Christ's account. *No need to say more - they are persecuted.*

That is how the world is, BUT GOD, says Jesus, is doing a new thing. He calls people to be the first to live in God's alternative reality. There is a new way of living, a new way of experiencing the world breaking in. The world may be one way, BUT GOD says that there is no need for it continue to be that way. God turns around impossible situations. God turns around the way of the world.

You will notice that the beatitudes don't offer people fame and fortune, they don't say that the world in general will change how it treats or regards us. What they do is offer a new perspective. Poor in Spirit - the Kingdom of heaven is your reward - and if you repent and fall in line with Jesus' way, that will be what you want most, anyway.

Those who mourn - there will be comfort found, even though the circumstances may not change.

The meek - they will inherit the earth, they will not earn it, but will have the freedom of the earth, the freedom not to need other validation, the freedom not to care what others think bestowed upon them by their faith God, who made the earth and made it good.

Those who hunger and thirst for righteousness - there's one thing that's sure: if you really long to be and to see good, then following Jesus is the best thing you could do.

The merciful - God will show them mercy even if no one else does, and that's what's most important.

The pure in heart - what a wonderful reward they are given, to see God. What else would you want? If your heart is pure, nothing else.

The peacemakers, those who act like God, striving to bring peace, to let love and freedom reign supreme will have God acknowledged them as his children. Again, if you are following in Jesus' revolution, then your reward surely fits your attributes.

Those who are persecuted on Jesus' account - won't care. So long as they are with Jesus, that is all that will matter to them.

The beatitudes show how following in Jesus' revolution turns what people might be looking for upside down. They show how God rewards people with the most fitting response to their priorities and attributes. The world may look like a bleak place at times, we may feel powerless in the way of the world; we may feel despised or misunderstood - but that's only if you continue to live in the darkness.

Jesus came to bring light to the people that lived in darkness, and the light turns our whole way of looking at life on its head. Success is not now about getting a "good job" with a high salary and prospects. Success is not now having the perfect family life. Success is not power.

Success is setting your heart on seeing God's Kingdom, in devoting your life to living in the light - and then, you will not be disappointed. Later Jesus is to put it this way "Seek first God's Kingdom and his righteousness and all these things will be added to you as well."

There are times when all of us feel weak and despised and of no account. But that is when we are not looking with God's eyes at ourselves or at the world. Things may look bleak BUT GOD changes all that, and teaches us to live out his new manifesto. And then, no matter what, there is happiness in the end. For then, as we saw last week, we know that hallmark of God's Kingdom: we know joy.