

**Linda Driver**

**Athelstone Uniting Church #90**

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## **Epiphany 4: Blessed**

**Text:** *Matthew 5:1-12 NIV*

Do you still have your star word? (*see last week for more info*)

If you were here last week, do you remember your star word?

I invite you to use that word as your lens with which to listen to the Message. How does your Word help you hear what God might be saying to you?

So, for me, my word is Thankfulness.

How might this Message help me understand Thankfulness more? Or perhaps to be more Thankful?

So, try the same with your word..

Let us pray:

Through your Word, help us focus on the light of Christ, may it change us and renew us, and may it move us to change and renew the world. Amen

I don't know if you have noticed... when I sign off on emails, notes in the newsletter or texts, I nearly always end by saying "Blessings".

Why do I do that? Because I want to express my heart that those I am communicating with receive and experience the abundant blessings and protection that God provides.

It has become a popular word for Jesus followers and has been adopted by many as a lovely thing to say.

..Wishing each other blessings,

saying Bless You after a sneeze,

feeling blessed when things are going well.

And the beatitudes – our reading today – would be one of the most *well-known* of the biblical texts that speaks of blessings – particularly to generations of Monty Python fans – who can happily quote:

Blessed are the cheesemakers!

in the movie *The Life of Brian*, a crowd had gathered and were trying to hear what Jesus was saying.. this led to a group of people heading off on a tangent over this misheard sentence!

Of course, what they missed was Blessed are the peacemakers!

Interestingly, this humorous scene is based on the understanding that Jesus was standing on top of the mountain preaching – with people gathered below him. This would make it hard to hear!

However Jesus had gone up on the mountain and sat down –

We can read this in 2 ways – either it was in an intimate setting with just his closest followers,

Or as Luke portrays it, he went down with them and stood on a level place on the mountain ...

He is very likely to have been speaking up toward the people. Sound carries so much better if you are facing up - I like this image of Jesus speaking from a lower place than the people..

Let's take a step back for a minute.. in Matthew's gospel, Jesus has just been preaching and healing, teaching in synagogues and calling his disciples. Large crowds from far and wide were following him.

So he headed up the mountain..

His teachings while there, have been collected in Matthew 5 to 7 and are referred to as the Sermon on the Mount.

As he speaks he gives us a glimpse of God's kingdom. God's wisdom. God's economy.

Jesus begins by speaking about those who are blessed – for theirs is the kingdom of heaven...

Blessed – to be blessed – is to be happy, to have received God's favour, to have God smiling on them.

The word beatitude, coming from *Beatus* - meaning *Blessed* in Latin.

These beatitudes are a set of kingdom values – describing the way those who are blessed by God live, behave, and respond in our world.

I want to share some insights into the beatitudes from Dave Andrews from his book *Plan Be*. In it he talks about how we can hold up the beatitudes as a way of changing the world.

He says: in global terms, we will only ever be little people, and, as little people, we can only do little things. Great things *can* happen. Not as a result of little people doing impossibly big things; but as a result of the cumulative effect of lots of little people doing lots of the little things we can do.

We can be the change we want to see in the world by simply persistently doing all the little things we wish other would do, but don't do, ourselves.

Who are the people that are blessed?

*The poor in spirit are blessed:* those who identify with the poor 'in spirit'. The ones who focus on the poor – not status and not riches.

The poor are blessed because in the upside down society that is the kingdom of God, the poor have a place of honour they can find nowhere else; and God says that he kingdom of God is theirs. They are blessed not because they are poor but because even though they are poor, they are loved; and because they are loved, people will share their wealth with them, and help them meet their basic needs.

The poor in spirit have humility.

*Those who mourn are blessed:* those who grieve over the injustice of the world.

Though there is much to grieve over, not everyone mourns the current state of the world. What we feel depends on what we see and hear – and that depends on where we stand in the world. If we identify with the top 20% of the world's population and are well nourished, we probably do feel blessed. However if we identify with the other 80% of the world's population – especially the bottom 20% - who go to sleep hungry – then we will mourn with those who mourn.

As God's people we are called to love the world as God does, and given the state of the world, all those who love the world as God does will mourn horribly over the state of the world as God does. We are moved to compassion – or a deep sense of shared pain.

Those who mourn have empathy.

*The meek are blessed:* those who get angry, but who never get aggressive.

Today we hear the word meek as weak or a wimp, wooss, gutless..

In Jesus' day, the word meek meant a quiet, controlled, inner strength of character – one could get angry but not lose control

The meek show self-restraint.

*Those who hunger and thirst for righteousness are blessed:* those who seek justice not vengeance. Those with righteousness.

Many of us hear the word righteousness as meaning piety and holiness. Here the world used indicates those who seek justice – social justice in this world – rather than personal piety.

Jesus pursued justice by confronting injustice in society, delivering the poor from exploitation of the rich, liberating the powerless from oppression by the powerful, freeing people from the cycles of violence and creating just communities intentionally committed to including outcasts.

Those who hunger and thirst for righteousness have righteousness

*The merciful are blessed:* those who are compassionate to everyone in need. Who do unto others as they would do unto you.

The merciful show mercy.

*The pure in heart are blessed:* those who are wholehearted in their desire to do right – even when no-one is looking. They'll reflect God in everything they say and do.

The pure in heart have integrity.

*The peacemakers are blessed:* those who work for peace in a world at war.

Jesus argued for a different approach to that taken in the Mosaic law that legitimated retaliation. You have heard it was aid Eye for an eye and tooth for a tooth – but I tell you – do not resist or retaliate against an evil person. If someone strikes you on the right cheek, turn to him the other cheek also.

The peace-makers display non-violence.

*Those persecuted for righteousness are blessed:* those who suffer for just causes.

Those persecuted for righteousness show perseverance.

So if we were to display the virtues that are blessed in the beatitudes, what kind of people would we be? asks Dave Andrews..

He says:

We would identify with the poor 'in spirit'

We would grieve over injustice in the world

We would get angry, but never get aggressive

We would seek to do justice, even to our enemies

We would extend compassion to all those in need.

We would act with integrity, not just for the publicity

We would work for peace in the midst of the violence

And we would suffer ourselves, rather than inflict suffering.

This is how we can, as Little People, Be the Change the world needs by recognising these virtues in one another and celebrating them as blessed by God.

Blessings from God – characteristics of the kingdom of God. And as such are part of God's grace – that God draws out in us in the power of the Holy Spirit – not something for us to strive for – like a spiritual to-do list!

Quoting my colleague Douglas Monaghan:

“those who already live a kingdom life already exhibit these things and as such are already blessed. It's not that we have to do these things to become accepted by God, or blessed, but rather because we have been accepted by God, or blessed, we will do these things. If we have a heart for Jesus we will hunger and thirst for righteousness, we will mourn injustice, we will actively work for peace and so on. When we see how Jesus lives, we see that these characteristics are the evidence of this way of life. We are blessed because we see how life is meant to be and we long for it ourselves. We are blessed because we don't simply accept the way things are, we long for all to see this new reality. We accept this new way of life and start living it through the power of the Holy Spirit. Through our lives, we show others this same thing so they can also see how life is meant to be and long for it as well.”

As the musicians come up and start playing gently, I invite you to reflect on these blessings.

Who has been a blessing to you, showing you love and mercy? Give thanks for them now

How has God blessed you to be the change in this world?

What action is God calling you to?

Let us pray:

Lord, as your church, your body, thank you for those who identify with the poor 'in spirit', those who grieve over injustice in the world, those who get angry, but never aggressive, those who seek to do justice, even to their enemies, those who extend compassion to all those in need, those who act with integrity, not for the publicity, those who work for peace in the midst of violence and who suffer themselves, rather than inflicting suffering.

Thank you Lord, that through these, your people, in the power of your Spirit, we will see change in our world. Amen

Let's join together in singing Matt Redman's song, honouring the blessing that Jesus is to us!

## Bibliography

The Abingdon preaching annual 2017

Dave Andrews: Plan Be

Douglas Monaghan: blog on facebook