

Blessed are those who hunger and thirst for righteousness, for they will be filled.

Some of you will have heard one, two or three of the previous sermons in this series on the Beatitudes, the eight “Blessed are ...” sayings of the Lord Jesus, at the beginning of his Sermon on the Mount. But some will not have heard them, so I have three preliminary points.

Firstly, although, as the apostle Matthew tells us, crowds were present when Jesus “went up on a mountainside and sat down” (5.1), “His disciples came to him, and he began to teach them” (5.1-2). So this was teaching for his disciples, not for the crowds, though they may have heard it too. So if you are a follower of Jesus, and I think most of us here today would think of ourselves as followers of Jesus, then this teaching is for you and for me. (SP)

My second preliminary point is the meaning of the word “Blessed”, with which each of these eight Beatitudes begin. It is good to compare versions of the Bible. The Good News Bible has the word “Happy” instead of “Blessed”. The Amplified Bible has “Joyful, nourished by God’s goodness”. The word seems to mean happy, in the sense of someone whose place in life is an enviable one; in that sense happy.

It is not a superficial happiness, a jollity, but a deep and lasting happiness.

My third preliminary point is that the first four of the eight Beatitudes are to do with our relationship with God, and this is the last of the first four. The second four are to do with our relationship with other people. They are “eight principal marks of Christian character and conduct”, as John Stott wrote in his commentary on them. The first three are about being “poor in spirit”, “mourning” and being “meek”. That is to say they are about acknowledging our spiritual poverty, and mourning our sinfulness, and having a humble attitude of meekness. They are about what God wants from us.

So today we come to the fourth in our series “Blessed are those who hunger and thirst for righteousness, for they will be filled.” (5.6)

This obviously refers to spiritual hunger and thirsting, not to physical hunger and thirst. They are strong words. We should really want righteousness, we should really desire it, we should long for it.

This is not the only place in Scripture where longing is described. The writer of Psalm 42 begins “As the deer pants for streams of water, so my soul pants for you, O God. ...

My soul thirsts for God, for the living God. When can I go and meet with God? My tears have been my food day and night, while men say to me all day long “Where is your God?”” (Ps 42.1-2)

The prophet Isaiah begins his 55th chapter (as we heard) “Come, all you who are thirsty, come to the waters” and three verses later “Give ear and come to me” and three more verses later “Seek the Lord while he may be found; call on him while he is near”.

Indeed Jesus’ words which we are considering today are based upon an Old Testament Scripture, as his words so often were : Psalm 107 verse 9 – “For he (the Lord) satisfies the thirsty and fills the hungry with good things”. (R)

Later in his ministry the Lord Jesus uses the metaphor of thirsting again, as we heard in our (gospel) reading. “On the last and greatest day of the feast (the Jewish Feast of Tabernacles), Jesus stood and said in a loud voice “If anyone is thirsty, let him come to me and drink.”” (John7.37)

Hungering and thirsting describes a strong desire. A real want. A need that will not go away.

And in our verse today it is a hunger and thirst for righteousness that we should have.

It is a total contrast with worldly ambition, desire for success in the world, desire for riches, desire for promotion. We should desire righteousness. We should hunger and thirst for it. I will come back to that.

But what does “righteousness” mean, in this saying of Jesus?

There are three possible answers. Legal righteousness, communal righteousness, personal righteousness.

The apostle Paul wrote to the Christians at Rome of “The righteousness from God comes through faith in Jesus Christ to all who believe” (Rom.3.22) He explained that we are reckoned righteous by God because of our faith in Jesus, who died on the Cross to atone for our sins. It is a legal standing, righteous rather than guilty. All who turn in faith to Christ receive it. This was the great truth that got lost from view in the Middle Ages and was rediscovered by Martin Luther, as we shall be

hearing next month, when we celebrate the 500th anniversary of the Reformation, which is probably the most important anniversary we shall experience in our lifetime. Believers have that legal righteousness already, so it is not that righteousness to which Jesus was referring in the Sermon on the Mount.

Was he referring to communal righteousness? This again is a form of righteousness to which the Bible refers. The prophet Amos in the Old Testament spoke about this. He said to the greedy extortionate Israelites of his day “You ... turn justice into bitterness and cast righteousness to the ground”. Instead he called them to “Let justice roll on like a river, righteousness like a never failing stream!”

God cares about communal righteousness, about righteous government, righteous judgement in the courts, righteous conduct in business, righteous behaviour in families.

But the previous three Beatitudes are all about personal thinking, so I do not think it was communal righteousness that the Lord Jesus had in mind on this occasion, though he certainly spoke about it at other times, particularly with regard to the teaching and conduct of the Pharisees.

That leaves the third meaning of righteousness, personal righteousness, our conduct - our doing righteous things, and not doing unrighteous things.

Personal righteousness involves making right choices of what we do day by day. It involves seeking to avoid situations in which we know we will be tempted to do wrong. ...

It involves standing up for others who need help, and standing up for what is right, however unpopular that may be. It involves helping others who are in need. It involves being unashamed to be a follower of the Lord Jesus. I could go on, much more could be added, but you know what I mean by personal righteousness.

As the Good News Bible translates it “Happy are those whose greatest desire is to do what God requires”. (R)

We are not to make a show of our righteousness. At the beginning of the next chapter Jesus said “Be careful not to do your acts of righteousness before men, to be seen by them”. And he went on to tell them not to make a show of their giving, of their praying, or of their fasting, like some of their hypocritical fellow countrymen were doing.

But we are to seek to be holy. The Apostle Peter wrote in his first letter “But just as he who has called you is holy, so be holy in all you do; for it is written: “Be holy, because I, (your God), am holy.”” (1Pet.1.15-16)

Later Peter wrote about Jesus “He himself bore our sins in his body on the tree, so that we might die to sin and live for righteousness” (1Pet.2.24). Because Jesus has borne our sins on the Cross we should reckon that sin is something we do not do, we should die to sin, and we should seek to live righteously.

Now in our verse today the Lord Jesus called us to “hunger and thirst for righteousness”. To have a real desire to be righteous. To long to be righteous in all we think, and speak, and do, and in all we avoid thinking and speaking and doing. And it is not just to be a wistful desire, but a craving, an earnest longing.

In the early 1970s I was in Derbyshire and was Vicar of one parish, simultaneously Rector of another, and simultaneously Priest-in-charge of a third. They were all small villages, full of people reluctant to change, especially because they feared what their fellow villagers would think. For the most part it was hard going, and I began running dry spiritually.

But I knew those who had been touched by the Holy Spirit in their ministry, in what became called the charismatic movement, and I began to hunger and thirst for righteousness in my life. I booked in for a conference organised by the Fountain Trust, an organisation which no longer exists because there came a time later when it felt its work was done. It had been a means of blessing the ministry of various friends of mine. Through that conference I was refilled with the Holy Spirit, and I came home rejoicing, with a fresh zeal for ministry.

It is good to hunger and thirst for righteousness. Why? Because of what the Lord Jesus said “Blessed are those who hunger and thirst for righteousness, for they will be filled.” They will be filled.

That is his promise. They will be filled.

He didn't say they may be filled. He didn't say they will be half filled. He said they will be filled.

As the Good News Bible translates it “God will satisfy them fully!” God will satisfy them fully!

So what about you? (R)

I expect most of us here have a desire to be better than we are. But maybe we have given up on hope of personal improvement. I believe the Lord Jesus is saying to us we don't have to give up. "Blessed are those hunger and thirst for righteousness, for they will be filled". That is his word to us today, to each of us.

And it is something which we are to go on doing, hungering and thirsting for righteousness. As we heard, later in his ministry Jesus said "If anyone is thirsty, let him come to me and drink". Drinking is not something you just do once; you continue to do it. And being hungry and thirsty for righteousness is not to be a one-off, but something we do continually, and if we do it we will be filled, we will be satisfied.

As the Virgin Mary said, when she was expecting to give birth to the baby Jesus, "He (God) has filled the hungry with good things but has sent the rich away empty" (Luke 1.53).

Some of you have heard some or all of the three previous sermons in this series. You have reflected upon your spiritual poverty in the first sermon, you have mourned the sin in your life in the second sermon, and in the third sermon you have been encouraged to accept meekly whatever is God's will for your life. Or maybe this is the first sermon in the series you have heard.

Whichever is the case, maybe there has been a time before this when you have hungered and thirsted for righteousness. But whether or not you have, it is most important that today we do not just hear God's word, but that we are doers of God's word, as the Apostle James urged in his New Testament letter.

Many of us will know how the Sermon on the Mount ended. The Lord Jesus told a simple parable about a man who built his house upon the rock, and another who built his house upon the sand. When the storm came the first house stood firm but the second house collapsed. ...

We are apt to think that Jesus was speaking about those who were listening to him and those were not. If so we misunderstood what he was saying.

Both groups of people listened to Jesus. Jesus said "Everyone who hears these words of mine and puts them into practice is like a wise man who built his house on the rock ... but everyone who hears these words of mine and does not put them into practice is like a foolish man who

built his house on sand” (Matt. 24-27). So we must put into practice what we hear from the Lord Jesus. Otherwise we are building on sand.

So in three simple steps I am going to try to help each one of us put these words into practice this morning “Blessed are those who hunger and thirst for righteousness, for they will be filled”.

Firstly, we will have a minute for silent reflection. So each of us can reflect, do we wish to hunger and thirst for righteousness in our lives, in our conduct? A minute to reflect. *One minute’s silence.*

Secondly, I’m going to pray a prayer, one line at a time, and pause you to repeat the line silently if you wish to do so. I will not be asking you later whether you have prayed the prayer. That will be entirely between you and God.

Lord Jesus Christ, thank you for your Beatitudes.

Thank you for making clear how you wish your followers to live.

I wish to hunger and thirst for righteousness.

Please help me to do so, day by day.

Thank you for your promise that those who hunger and thirst will be filled, will be satisfied.

I make this prayer knowing you will keep your promise.

Thank you Lord Jesus, Amen.

Thirdly and finally, I will pray, briefly.

Lord Jesus Christ, thank you for all here who hunger and thirst after righteousness; may your name be glorified through our lives. Amen.