

St. Paul's Dorking Small Groups 11th January 2009

Good News – good news defined Matt 5:1-12



Word: Key points from Sunday's sermon

Forecasts for this coming year make gloomy reading. House prices will continue to fall, savings will yield little income, 600,00 jobs could go, lawyers say that there will be a significant rise in the divorce rate as financial crises pushes relationships to breaking point, climate scientists predict that 2009 is likely to rank in the top 5 years of temperature rises and that from the end of this year the rise will be more accelerated and less reversible! Bad news beckons!

And yet *"there were shepherds living out in the fields near by, keeping watch over their flocks by night. An angel of the Lord appeared to them, and the glory of the Lord shone around them and they were terrified. But the angel said to them, "Do not be afraid. I bring you Good News of great joy that will be for all the people."* Luke 2:8-10.

Good News of great joy for all the people! Before we pack away the narrative of the Christmas Story for another year let's take the opportunity for the truth of the angel's message of Good News to sink in! Think of the context of the angel's exhortation to the shepherds in first century Palestine – there was economic uncertainty, widespread poverty and injustice, inequality of opportunity and a background of violence, political instability and uprising with the threat of war! Yet the angel says "I bring Good News." It is in this very context of Bad News and the threat of Bad News that a Gospel of Good News is forged, the beginnings of a different way of life is birthed in a stable in Bethlehem, hope for a future is born, a new way of life, a new Kingdom begins.

Over the next few months we will be exploring what it means both to receive and to be Good News in our world today. Along the way we will be exploring some of the struggles and hang ups we have with our Christian faith. Matthew's gospel will be as springboard and where better place to start than with the Beatitudes. Read Matt 5:1-11.

The Beatitudes come like a bolt out of the blue for anyone who thinks that the Christian faith is a sad miserable affair. The word beatitude or blessing can be defined as 'heavenly happiness of the highest kind (Chambers). At the birth of Jesus the angel said to the shepherds "I bring good news of great joy" and here in Galilee Jesus proclaims his manifesto of profound joy and heavenly happiness! But let's get real for a moment! It's Monday morning, the holiday is over, the job is on the line, it's stressful at home, there's nothing to look forward to and it's cold, in fact it's freezing! Where's the joy and heavenly happiness now! Somewhere along the line it seems as if we have been sold the line that life should be easy and we can often feel short changed when it doesn't turn out like that! But Christ calls his followers to a deep joy and happiness rooted in the love of God and in obedience to him and his ways. A way of life that will often necessarily challenge and contrast with the way of the world a way of life that in a counter culture way really is Good News for all who would hear it.

In Matthew's account of the Beatitudes the deep joy, happiness and blessing for those who would follow Jesus is spelled out in all its radical glory.

V3 Blessed are the poor in Spirit – if you are ground down by life but still trust God you will enjoy the undergirding security of dependence on him

V4 Blessed are those who mourn – if your heart is broken you are wide open for the comfort that God will pour in.

V 5 Blessed are the meek – if you put God first and foremost God will honour you and lift you up

V 6 Blessed are those who hunger and thirst for righteousness – if you have a deep desire for goodness and justice then God will be your resource and fill you with his Spirit

V7 Blessed are the merciful – if forgiveness is at the heart of your life then you will know the power of God's forgiveness at work in you.

V8 Blessed are the peacemakers – if your life is characterized by bringing peace into your homes, family, friends, community then you will be blessed as a child of God.

V 10 -12 Blessed are those who are persecuted – if you appear to lose everything because you follow Christ, if you are faithful to Christ till the very end you can be assured that God will be faithful to you.



Witness: questions to discuss

1. Good News or Bad News? How do you feel about the year ahead?
2. Think about the challenges that lie ahead and any 'Bad News' situations there may be on the horizon. How may these be opportunities for God's Good News to be born? Share your reflections.
3. How do our lives as Christians challenge and contrast with the world around us? How counter culture are we/ should we be?
4. Carefully consider each of the Beatitudes. Which do you find most difficult to identify with and why?
5. 'Heavenly happiness of the highest kind', great joy, a manifesto of profound joy and heavenly happiness!
Do these echo our experience of faith? If not why not?
6. **For further thought:** Read the parable of the unmerciful servant in Matt 18:23-35. What is the difference between being merciful and forgiving and being taken advantage of.