

What kind of Manifesto? Blessedness: Humbleness and mercy.

Matthew 5:1-16 (Sunday March 19th, 2017. Geoff Thorington-Hassell)

We have been on a journey since January of this year looking at the “**Jesus we never knew.**” We looked at first “what kind of Messiah?” Where the kingdom is coming so you need to change your mind and your thinking now! Embrace the change of the new reality that is about to break in.

But what kind of Kingdom? What’s the character, the nature of this Kingdom? The wilderness tests helped illustrate this. Is it a Kingdom based on and sustained by wealth, violence, spectacle, patronage, power and evil? Or is it one based on faithfulness, obedience, worship and dependence on God? Just how different will it prove to be? Just how different will this Messiah need to be?

Now we are looking at “what’s this kingdom like?” Whose it for? Here in the *sermon on the mount* and in *Luke 6 with the sermon on the plain* it begins to be pulled together. A manifesto of blessing and describing who are the beneficiaries of these in this coming kingdom. The Jesus manifesto is a sea change with a new authority, governance and life. The breaking in of a new emerging community of the redeemed that helps illustrate and demonstrate this. The people of the resurrection. The Gospel the Good News of reconciliation where *Jesus is reconciling all things to himself (Colossians)*. With new life in the Spirit, (Nicodemus - *John 3:1-21*), the book of *the Acts* of the Holy Spirit characterised by joy (*Philippians*) but also suffering, difficulty, challenge. It will be offensive to Jews and nonsense to Greeks (*1 Corinthians 1:18-25*). Yet for those who find the narrow road (*Matt 7:13-14*) the **discovery of a happiness** that is to be envied and desired. This morning we are looking at two further realities of discovery in following and embracing the new way of life that is being offered. The Kingdom of gift, generosity. **You don’t fight your way in. You don’t earn your way in. It becomes you and you become it by being changed, transformed, by the life of God from within. It results in good works (VV15,16)**, it enlightens and reveals what God is like, revealed by Jesus the Messiah to show, tell and embody what it means to accept the offer of life, life in all its fullness.

It is very radical. It is counter to the world and the way the world does things, gets things done and what it values. Who it values. It is not about personal peace, profit, security and certainty. Of grasping, defending, holding but the willingness to let go, to forgive, to not impose through strength applied but to walk humbly. By refusing to give in to the temptation to use force but rely on God to move and to work. Being willing to respect others, even our enemies, the right to choose and to love and serve and be concerned for them in the way that God looks at those who are alienated, dismissive, and bitter towards him.

We are looking this time at the couplet of meekness- translated humbleness- and mercy. For this results in receiving what God has promised and that those who are merciful to others- God will be merciful to them. Humble people. Merciful people will

inherit and receive the fruit of their obedience to the life of God in his Kingdom. This is the future in the present.

Jane has helped us think about the couplet the poor in spirit and the pure in heart. Those who mourn and those who are hungry for righteousness. To understand the teachings of Jesus is a way of understanding the person of Jesus and perhaps in doing so find on the way aspects of Jesus we never knew. We had just assumed we knew. Jane asked us. **“Do you think you are blessed?” “You “in the plural.** Are we a blessed congregation of God’s people? What is that blessing? That we have more material things? An old testament understanding of a good wife, many children, abundant crops? Riches? Honour? Wisdom? Beauty? Good health? That we have more things and better things and more property than other people? No? *Jesus says to us in his kingdom it is not the rich, the powerful that get all the blessing. Not those who live in luxury flats and penthouses and mansions. Rather it is those who are the lowly, the poor, the hungry, the thirsty, the meek, the merciful, the mourning. It is the Kingdom community Jesus describes which is learning to discover what it might mean to love one another as Jesus has loved us. The blessings that Jesus describes are not entry requirements or practical advice for successful living but declarations of what it means to be in God’s Kingdom and authentically living in it.* Who have said “yes” to God’s offer of life, living in the light of anticipation of God’s reign. They are orientated as life together in the community of discipleship. They are cross cultural and counter cultural. *“For it is God’s grace that you have been saved through faith “(writes Paul) “It is not the result of your own efforts, but God’s gift, so that no one can boast about it.” God has made us what we are and in our union with Christ, he has created us for a life of good deeds, which he has prepared for us to do. “ (Eph 2:8-10). Therefore (a bit later on in the chapter he argues) “ in union with him you too are being built together with all the others into a place where God lives through his Spirit.” (Eph 2:22).*

Jesus declared what sort of kingdom he is bringing in by his presence, his teaching. Jesus is about God’s kingdom on earth but also in heaven. It both exists now and that as we live as an alternative community we exist as a witness to him. Paul has a big vision of our call and witness. *“God, who is the creator of all things, kept his secret hidden through all the past ages, in order that at the present time, by means of the church, the angelic rulers and powers in the heavenly world might learn of his wisdom in all its different forms.”(Eph 3:10).* Yet not just them but to those around us. *“Since you have become the Lord’s people, you are in the light. So you must live like people who belong to the light” (Eph 5:8b).* Jesus gives us the keys to a blessed life. An authentic, happy, full, and fulfilled life not a shallow satisfied, safe life.

The Happy Humble

So, meekness or humility or humbleness as it is translated here in the Good News translation? Is there a difference? Meekness might be described as strength under control. It is not being a doormat but someone who is teachable and patient under suffering. They are modest, without feeling better than others. Humility is similar it

avoids being superior but willing to have a servant heart towards others with an absence of pride or self-assertion. It often puts others interests ahead of their own interests.

Everyone who has humility has meekness and every person with meekness is likely to be humble. Meekness can refer to our behaviour to others, humbleness is an attitude to oneself - but something still seen by others. Yet both are evidenced in Jesus in whom our life is now bound up in- *“being found in human form, he humbled himself by becoming obedient to the point of death, even death on the cross.”* (Phil 2:8) *“Therefore God highly exalted him.”* (v9) While *“God opposes the proud by giving grace to the humble”* (Jas 4:6) and as **Jesus affirmed *“whoever exalts himself will be humbled, and whoever humbles himself will be exalted”*** (Matt 23:12).

So, we see in Jesus a pattern of restraint established in the desert, in the wilderness. Jesus did not twist people’s arms. He stated the consequences of choices then threw the decision back on the other party. He did not have a Saviour complex. The obsession to constantly solve other people’s problems for them, So when the rich young ruler asked *“what must I do to inherit eternal life?”* (Luke 18:18) Jesus answered him but he also let him walk away. Jesus had a realistic view of how the world works *“because of the increase of wickedness, the love of most will grow cold* (Matt 24:12)” He do not cure people who were not ready to be cured. He showed an incredible respect for human freedom. He did not manipulate, or use emotional pressure. He left space for doubt, disbelief, unbelief.

We have in church history sought to improve on the way of Jesus. Sometimes joining hands with governments and empires as a short cut to power. Worshipping success, rather than God. Using miracle, mystery and authority. Blessed are the strong. Blessed are the triumphant. Is it masochism or profound wisdom this spirit that permeates of self-sacrifice that seems to be so highly prized? The blessing that comes to those who are poor, the meek, the merciful, the persecuted. To those Jesus says not to resist evil violently but not to give in to it either by offering the second cheek to the person that hits you and to do good to them that hate you and forgive those who sin against you breaking the cycle of vengeance and revenge. Enduring some hardships with the prospects of other rewards in mind. Serving God. Trusting God. The results of which, if not experienced here, would be experienced in eternity. Yet as CS Lewis commented *“we are half hearted creatures fooling about with drink and sex and ambition when infinite joy is offered us.”* **As churches grow wealthier and more successful they are more comforted in this world rather than thought of the next.** Yancey in his book “ The Jesus I never knew” asks “what good did it do the slaves to believe that God as not satisfied with a world that included back breaking labour and masters armed with whips and lynching ropes.?” ¹ To believe in future rewards is to believe that the Lord’s long arm bends toward justice, to believe that one day the proud will be overthrown and the humble raised up and the hungry filled with good things. The

1 Yancey P. The Jesus I never knew Zondervan 1995 p112

prospect of future rewards in no way cancels out our need to fight for justice now in this life. There is no shame in believing the promise of reward but of hope. That there is no future in evil. Rather the wise person invests in the future of God which is good and goodness - and that can start now. The way we inherit is not by might but by meekness or humility. We do not need to grab what God intends to give but have the strength to wait for it. In **Psalm 37** we read

“Do not be worried on the account of the wicked

Don't be jealous of those who do wrong

They will soon disappear like grass that dries up

They will die like plants that wither.

Trust in the Lord and do good, live in the land and be safe

Seek your happiness in the Lord and he will give you your hearts desire

Give yourself to the Lord trust in him and he will help you....

Be patient and wait for the Lord to act.....

The righteous will possess the land and live in it forever”

Others translate this as the meek shall inherit the land, or the earth.

In the day of last things of the new heavens and new earth we learn to live in Christ's reign now before the reconciliation of all things.

Blessed- or happy- are the merciful.

Henry Nouwen, a Harvard professor, moved to work in a community called Daybreak.² The **L Arche communities set up by Jean Vanier** to support people who have profound disabilities. Adam was a 25-year-old man who could not speak, dress or undress himself, eat without help and who suffers regular seizures. It takes an hour and half to get Adam up, give him his medication, carry him to his bath, wash and shave him, clean his teeth, dress him, walk him to the kitchen, give him his breakfast, get him into his wheelchair and then take him to his therapeutic exercises which he does for the rest of the day. Rather than working among a youthful, gifted, intellectual elite Nouwen now worked with what some might regard as a useless person.

Yet what Adam taught Nouwen was that becoming more human was not our mind or the rivalry, competition and obsessive drive for success in academia – our ability to think - but our ability to love. Uncovering an emptiness to be embraced before one can be filled with God and thus a new kind of spiritual peace discovered only in the disciplines and benefits of such a service of mercy.

² Ibid p119,120

You can know a person by the company he keeps. Jesus was a friend of sinners.

He dined with lepers. Jesus accepted hospitality from Pharisees inviting him to meals as a trap to scrutinize his every move. He allowed a woman to anoint his feet with her hair and her tears. He was indiscreet. The last two invited meals we know about took place in the homes of publicans or tax collectors. People who were unpopular - possibly corrupt. For women and other oppressed people, including foreigners, Jesus turned upside down the wisdom of the day. A great reversal. Normally society looks up to the rich, the beautiful, the successful. But because God sees no undesirables, neither should we. God loves the poor, the suffering, the persecuted, so should we. We matter to God. *“By loving the unlovable” said Augustine “you made me lovable,”*³

Those who show mercy find it. Nothing moves us to forgive like the knowledge that we ourselves have been forgiven and nothing proves more clearly that we have been forgiven than our own readiness to forgive. As Jesus illustrated by the parable of the unmerciful servant in *Matthew 18:21-35*. *“Be patient with me!”* he pleaded but such mercy was not extended to the fellow servant who owed him a few pounds. So the king replied when it was brought to his attention *“ I forgave you the whole, amount you owed me , just because you asked me to. You should have had mercy on your fellow servant just as I had mercy on you.”*

For those of you who are thinking that this is easy or self-evident, you obviously haven't tried it.

To move from a place of injury and wrong to forgiveness and then from forgiveness to where enemies can become friends is hard. In July 2010, there was a move that took place after 450 years for remembering in new ways in apology and forgiveness among Anabaptists, Lutherans and Catholics. Where *Andre Gringerich Stoner*, an Anabaptist, commented “God can rewrite our story.” In Stuttgart in Germany the Lutheran World Federation expressed sorrow and regret towards the thousands of Anabaptists martyred for their faith and asked for forgiveness. In response *Dinisa Ndlova of Zimbabwe* responded with humility and emotion. “We believe that today God has heard your confession and is granting your appeal for forgiveness. We joyfully and humbly join with God in giving forgiveness.” That took 450 years. 450 years for one Christian community to ask for forgiveness. Another to receive it. As a community of faith amongst communities of faiths there is always the challenge to be merciful, and allow God to rewrite our story. Easy it is not - but who said the Christian life was to be easy?

So finally, this is an invitation into a way of life that is rooted in God because this is what God is like. It is communal but requires us each to participate. It is a life born of the Spirit through the gift of God's Good News where by embracing what Jesus has done on the cross has enabled us to live differently and not to learn the way of the nations. We are different, because God has made and is making us to be different. We are becoming who God intended us and enables us to be. Humble. Merciful. Jesus

3 Ibid p159

announces in his manifesto for us to embrace that life of God and live out our lives in the truth of it together.

All of this is possible only because Jesus is the light of the world. As he illuminates us we can then shine with his reflected light but we need to be lit up with him. Then folk will see our good deeds and **praise not us but God** who is the source of the light they see reflected in us. As a community of following Jesus together we are not to withdraw or separate but shine. We need each other's help to do that. We cannot do it by ourselves to walk to a different drum beat to the society around us which can be hard to resist – particularly if we are in a minority of one.