**SUNDAY JANUARY 29, 2023, EPIPHANY IV MATTHEW. Ch 5: 1-12**

May the words of my mouth and the meditations of my heart be acceptable to you, O Lord, my rock and my redeemer

The beatitudes. So familiar, so comforting, so wise. I am sure that many books have been written about them, I’m certain that millions upon millions of humans have spent billions of hours meditating upon them.

And it is most likely that I am not going to have anything original to say about them this morning. But I was once told by a very wise teacher, the same one who said that when a class is mostly boys, the first thing you do is make them exercise out the fidgets; she said that repetition is the heart of learning. And a different retired teacher told me last Monday afternoon that there is no harm in re-learning something as important as what Jesus had to say.

So, just for context, where are we in the story? Relatively early on: Jesus has been baptized by John, God in the form of a dove has endorsed Jesus in his ministry, John has been arrested by Herod, and Jesus realizes that it is now his turn to bring God’s word to the people, so he begins his ministry and recruits his posse. It is difficult for me to take in what a magnetic person Jesus must have been, to realize that four businessmen, Peter and Andrew, James and John just dropped their nets, their family businesses, the means by which they supported spouses, children, mothers-in-law. Obviously, they knew that they were getting a much more valuable opportunity, and how I wish that time travel actually comes to pass, so we can send a camera back and see for ourselves.

And if people thought that John the baptiser was attracting attention, dangerous attention, watch out world, because Jesus is the real McCoy, the actual Son of God. He was a healer, not a phony snake-oil salesman, but an actual healer. And he was a revolutionary teacher. Everywhere he went, he talked to people, he gave advice, he listened to them, he kept on talking about God, and how to get closer to God, and how God loves us, and wants us to be with him. Of course, he talked about the need for repentance, because sin is what keeps us away from God. And he brought comfort to the poorest and most oppressed of folk. I think that Jesus must have been saying the same thing so many times to so many different people, and been so charismatic that nobody ever forgot what was said, nor were their children and grandchildren allowed to forget. Indeed, we’ve been telling those same stories and sayings ever since, for nigh on two thousand years now.

So, the Beatitudes: Put your hand up if you can tell me one or two. (Call on anyone, or all)

The fifth chapter of Matthew’s gospel is devoted to the immortal Sermon on the Mount. And likewise, the sixth and seventh chapters. It probably didn’t happen exactly as described,

Matthew was likely combining dozens of such sessions, but it would be too tedious to go into each one separately.

And Jesus begins by giving comfort and hope to his followers. The truly poor whose cloak during the day became their blanket during the night, always on tenterhooks about the possibility of famine, or an epidemic of some sort of disease in a time without antibiotics, or of the possible need to sell family members into slavery in order to pay a tax debt. No wonder people came from all over the Aramaic speaking world to behold the Son of God, the genuine article.

It has been pointed out that the society in which Jesus preached was based on honour and shame, whereas our current milieu is all about guilt. So ‘blessed’ has a sense of honour about it. Blessed are the meek for they will inherit the earth. And not just six long feet of it. The meek are honourable because their honour, which they have lost by being meek, will be restored to them.

Think how comforting that is: the poor, the oppressed, the sick, the widowed, all the ‘losers’ of this world, whose honour has been diminished through no fault of their own: they will be blessed and placed on a level footing with people who have great honour.

We like to think that our times are bad; that we are on the verge of the End Times, what with Covid and climate change and war and rumours of war, many of us think that the whole world is going to hell in a handbasket. Many of us are depressed, and feeling dreary and without hope.

This is not how Jesus wants us to be. Jesus is saying we need to hang in there: we need to be poor in spirit, we need to be peacemakers, we need to be merciful, we need to hunger and thirst for righteousness, we need to be pure in heart, we need to accept being reviled and persecuted. We need to work our way through all the awful things that are happening to us and around us. And you ask for why?

Rejoice and be glad, for your reward is great in heaven. That’s a quote. From the Son of God.

Jesus is, as usual for him, turning everything upside down. Your reward is great in heaven. In heaven, all honour is restored, in heaven we will be blessed.

So let us take time this week to see how poor in spirit we are, how meek, how pure in heart, how willing to accept unpopular opinions about us because we are trying to follow in Jesus’ footsteps, and do as he bade us, feed the hungry, clothe the naked, love God with our whole heart and our neighbours likewise. It’s a lot to ask, but our reward is great in heaven.

And I close as always with the reminder that we have the Holy Spirit on our side, now and every moment, here and in all places, comforting, strengthening and advising us; we need only to listen with our hearts. How cool is that? Amen