

Sermon 02 February 2020

Readings: mathew 5: 1-12

FSHS

Being Blessed

Today, my reflection is about what it means to be blessed.

This week I had the unusual experience of spending an hour speaking to a bank manager. I was asked by our church treasurer to go to the bank and sign a form that all the church trustees must sign.

The bank manager was very pleasant and a very nice person. But I did think it was a bit unusual that the appointment was for one hour. Last time I spent that long with a bank manager was years ago, when I went to apply for a mortgage. I got the feeling during our conversation that the manager was hoping I would open a personal bank or sign up to one of the bank's financial products.

Anyway, during my interview with the bank manager, she asked me some unusual questions. One question was, **'what (to me) were the most important things in life?'** An unusual question to ask someone who was only at the bank to sign a form.

But I answered her question, by naming the things that are most important to me: my family, my faith, and being content, or being happy. These were three things that were important to me.

She told me that most people answer: "To be happy in life".

Then she asked about my goals in life (again unusual – since I was only there to sign a form and show proof of my identity).

I said, "I wouldn't mind a trip to the Holy land, or a cruise around the Mediterranean, but that I wouldn't be too upset if I never made it there."

I could see where the conversation was going, so I answered, 'I do not intend to open any new accounts, and I'm happy with my current bank, and happy with my life'.

But her questions stuck with me, "What are the most important things in life? And what would make me happy? Or content?"

Last night I was at the Michael Bubl  concert at the Mission Estate,

I'm not a fan of Michael Bubl , but went to keep my wife happy. A couple of busloads of us went from Havelock North to the wonderful concert. I'm glad I went. It was a fantastic concert!

I think most of us who went, were looking forward to an evening of happiness, to the sounds of Michael Bubl . But all of us were mature enough to know that that kind of happiness may be wonderful but is only temporary.

Most Havelockians are reasonably comfortable and have worked hard to achieve that level of comfort - but being comfortable doesn't automatically translate into being happy. As Jesus said, people cannot live on bread alone. Real happiness happens at a deeper level than our appetite for 'things'.

Surprisingly, Michael Bubl  mentioned that the things that were important to him, were his family, his faith, and doing what he loved most, which is singing to crowds like us.

But the questions the bank manager stuck with me, "What are the most important things in life? And what would make me happy? Or content?"

Max Weber, a German philosopher, and economist, and one of the fathers of modern Sociology came up with the theory that there are three things that define the social status of people: Those three things are: Power, property and prestige. The three 'Ps'. He called these three things: 'Scarce values', or 'scarce resources' - because they are not evenly distributed in society- and tend to end up in the possession of a minority of people. But "these", said Weber, are the three things that most people aspire to, believing that they are a means of achieving happiness. Power, property and prestige.

Different cultures emphasize one or more of these three scarce resources. I am generalising here, but in the Samoan and Polynesian cultures, the emphasis is on possessing 'mana', or prestige. One can possess 'mana' without necessarily being rich or powerful. But prestige or 'mana' is important in Polynesian cultures.

In the Western and Asian cultures, property seems to be the main emphasis. Acquiring possessions is important. But one can possess property without necessarily acquiring 'mana' at the same time. The character Scrooge in the Dickens novel represents someone who possess property and power, but no mana. Some politicians have been tarred with that same brush.

We can think back to Jesus' temptations in the wilderness. The three things that the devil offered Jesus were, power, possessions, and prestige. And he rejected all three in favour of a different narrative, and a different set of values.

Jesus must have thought a lot about the question of 'what makes for true happiness. And in the beatitudes, we read this morning, Jesus names the things that he believed are the most important in life, and how to achieve happiness through them. Jesus inverts the values of power, property and

prestige – turns them upside down - in favour of a culture he calls, “The kingdom of heaven”.

William Barclay described the beatitudes as, “Jesus opening his heart and mind to his disciples” about the most important things in life. (1)

You may remember that in last week’s reading Jesus began his public ministry with a very simple message,” Repent, for the kingdom of heaven is at hand (or is near to you)” The same message preached by John the Baptist.

In this week’s reading, Jesus expands on that one-line sermon, by naming the things that will make for true happiness.

Nine times he said: ‘Happy/or Blessed are those’ who do these things ...

Each of the ‘Blesseds’ is an agent of transformation for anyone who takes them seriously.

I’m not going to go through all nine of the ‘Blesseds’ (you’ll be happy to hear), but I will comment on one of the beatitudes, that has meant a lot to me, over the years.

The very first “Blessed” is, ‘Blessed are the poor in spirit, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven’ In the Good News Bible it is translated, ‘Blessed are those who know that they are spiritually poor, for the kingdom of heaven belongs to them’.

Another way of saying this beatitude is: “Blessed are those who know they have a lot to learn”. I think of myself as one of those people. Someone who has a lot to learn. When you know that about yourself, you become teachable. You become like someone who is about to go on a new adventure.

If you are a student, this verse is for you. “Blessed are those who know they have a lot to learn”. The doctor, that we put so much trust in, begins as a learner, but becomes an authority through their openness to learning new knowledge.

I don’t want to sound too pious, but when I first made a commitment to accept Jesus as my Lord and Saviour - in my teens, ‘Blessed are the poor in spirit’ became my special verse. I felt so spiritually poor, and I still feel like that today. But there is a joy, and a blessedness, in learning new things about God and what it means to be a follower of Christ.

In the process of learning, your life is transformed by the new things you are learning, and you may even become an agent of transformation, like the doctor whose knowledge transforms the life of his or her patients.

If we have the courage to live by the 'beautiful attitudes', as the beatitudes are sometimes called, we will be continually changed and become the agents of change in the community in which we live. We will, with God's help, become a blessing to others.

As we begin a new year, that is my prayer, that we at st Columba's may continue to be a blessing to the community in which this lovely church is set.

F S HS Amen.

(1) Barclay, W., The Daily Study Bible – The Gospel of Matthew Vol 1 Chapters 1-10, (Saint Andrew Press, Edinburgh, 1979), p. 87).