

St Andrew's Chesterton, 29.01.17

Sermon on the Mount 1 (Matthew 5.1-12): Who is this sermon addressed to?

What did he say?

A man towards the front says 'I think it was "Blessed are the cheesemakers."

'Aha, what's so special about the cheesemakers?' says the snooty woman.

The pompous know-all replies,

'Well, obviously it's not meant to be taken literally; it refers to any manufacturers of dairy products.'

Oh, how Monty Python's *Life of Brian* caused a storm. Malcolm Muggeridge – remember him – argued that it was blasphemous or thereabouts. I'm not sure it would raise many eyebrows if it were released today - I'm not sure whether I think that's progress or not.

Despite popular misconception – including Muggeridge's – the cheesemaker scene is the only one where Jesus actually makes an appearance and then it's only at quite a distance. The cheesemakers are, of course, the peacemakers; these are the beatitudes (from the Latin for blessed, *beatus*) which are the opening lines of the sermon on the mount. There are nine blessings, sometimes translated 'happy', eight in the third person – the poor in spirit, the meek, those who hunger and thirst for righteousness, the merciful, the pure in heart, the peacemakers and those who are persecuted for righteousness' sake; the ninth is in the second person – blessed are you when people revile you and persecute you. We'll return to that.

But back to *Life of Brian*. I don't think it's just the crowds who have got the wrong end of the stick; so have the screenwriters. The snooty woman and the pompous man would not have been there, for the general semi-interested crowd weren't there:

When Jesus saw the crowds, he went up the mountain; and after he sat down, his disciples came to him. Then he began to speak, and taught them... (5.1-2)

This teaching isn't addressed to what John Cleese called in another incarnation the 'riff-raff'. This is far more intimate, the audience is specially chosen. There are no mere hangers-on here; these are disciples, the ones Jesus has hand-picked to be with him. To be at this sermon you had to be invited and the opening lines give us a clue at the guest list.

Two weeks ago I was talking about how Jesus began both the first and the last stage of his public ministry at places called Bethany, which means 'house of the poor'. These were small towns where the housing prices were low, full of what we would call social housing and where those with risky infectious diseases lived. This was where Jesus stayed with his friends and companions. This was the company he kept together with other religious movements that cared for the poor and longed for the coming on earth of what they called the kingdom of heaven. It was from such neighbourhoods that Jesus recruited his students, his disciples.

I have been to many study courses on the beatitudes that have started from the premise that these are defining qualities which he is urging his followers to aspire to: making peace, being pure in heart, yearning for righteousness, being meek. But that doesn't work, does it? He is not urging us to mourn or to be persecuted as though he is saying that such medicine is good for us. No, he is not urging his hearers to be beatitude-type people. Rather he has selected the audience to be beatitude people: these are the ones he has chosen. Number nine gives the game away because it is addressed to 'you'. Those who in number eight are persecuted for righteousness' sake are in number nine 'you':

'Blessed are you when people revile you and persecute you and utter all kinds of evil against you falsely on my account. Rejoice and be glad, for your reward is great in heaven, for in the same way they persecuted the prophets who were before you. (5.11-12)

In the term calendar I have entitled this first in the series on the sermon on the mount 'Who is this sermon addressed to?'. And the answer is those whom he begins by blessing. Jesus chose to surround himself with the inadequate, the misfits, the not-so-clever, the left-behind and those who had suffered for doing the right thing and campaigning for justice.

Now my challenge is that when I look out at all of you what is *this* bunch of disciples like? – yes, there are a few of you like that, yes – a few of you collapsed, socially inadequate types with not much between the ears. But I don't want to seem toadying but a good number of you are remarkably able people doing highly sophisticated jobs that give you a good deal of respect in your social circles and neighbourhoods. But let me tell you – you are not here because of that and you were not top of Jesus' guest list. You are welcome, really welcome, but you were and are some way back in the queue. That's the deal in the kingdom of heaven. That's the revolution Jesus came to bring. It starts with those at the top of the guest list. And that really was revolutionary. Let me explain.

Matthew, whose gospel we are reading for much of this church year, is writing primarily for and from a Jewish audience, those formed in their thinking by what we now call the Old Testament or, better, the Old Covenant. The principle figure of faith and authority was Moses – they sat at his feet before they sat at Jesus's feet; they shaped their lives before they followed the gospel way by the way of Moses who led his people out of captivity, through the waters of the Red Sea into a period of testing in the wilderness before they reached the promise land during which they went to a mountain where their teacher mediated to them the authoritative teaching of the law, the Torah.

Matthew is inviting us to go with these disciples on a new journey with a new authoritative teacher, who leads his people through similar experiences of rescue through the water – John's baptism in the Jordan – 40 days (this time) being tested in the wilderness and then a new Mount Sinai where a new law will be given and a new covenant made. And then when the people of old were towards the end of their journey Moses pointed to two mountains, one which would stand for being blessed and one for being cursed and blessings and curses are uttered. The blessed are all about being rich, well fed, well regarded and safe from danger; the cursed are all about losing all those things, being poor, hungry, downtrodden, defeated, despised – in other words, the very circumstances of those whom Jesus now calls blessed. In this new covenant there is a new deal: no longer blessing now, today, but blessing on a future day, a day to be prayed for and worked towards, the day when the kingdom comes.

What does that mean for us? Well, if you feel rubbish, the bottom of the pile, downtrodden, you have no money, no resources, little worth in our fast-changing society – then you are blessed says Jesus. Move up the queue, come and spend some time with me on the mountain.

If you are, frankly, doing pretty well, are highly qualified, well paid or able to live well without paid employment; if you enjoy the respect of others and rarely face the opposition of hostility of others, then perhaps think about the company you keep. Jesus said to some of those types – think about who you're inviting to dinner; scrap all the people like you and invite those who wouldn't otherwise be asked. I'm not saying do that literally but a good exercise for the well-off and respectable is to spend time with those who aren't in some form or other. There's plenty of opportunity in our city – volunteering opportunities at the foodbank, the street pastors or the Cambridge Nightshelter. Not to patronise the poor but to be with those whom Jesus called blessed and to be with him because that's where he is.

The sermon on the mount is a revolution from beginning to end. Its aim was to turn the world upside down. It has never been fully understood: yes we know he said 'peacemakers' not 'cheesemakers' but none of us have heard it all properly yet. We continue to mishear it; we don't get it. The revolution has hardly begun. So let's listen in these coming weeks just a bit more carefully, attentively. The meaning of what may seem quite familiar may only now be dawning.