

BLESSED ARE THE MEEK

(Video footage of the parody of the Sermon on the Mount in *Monty Python's Life of Brian* was played in Chapel before the start of the Dean's sermon).

O God our Father, pour upon us the gift of your Holy Spirit. Breathe, move and inspire written and spoken words, that we may know your living word, Jesus Christ. Amen.

This term we are looking at the Beatitudes. And, Tim has done his own re-arrangement of the order of the Beatitudes. I think this could be so that he could play a little joke – 'I know', he said, 'let's get the Dean to preach about the meek' – ha, ha! I have to be honest and admit that while there are many things you might want to say about the Dean, being meek is not normally top of most people's lists...

So, what does it mean to say '*Blessed are the Meek*'? We've already seen the confusion in *Monty Python's Life of Brian*, '*Blessed are the Greek*'. Does it mean not saying 'boo to a goose', and being a doormat that lets people walk all over you?

As you've already heard in the last couple of weeks, and as we saw in the video, Jesus goes up a mountain to teach the crowd and gives the Sermon on the Mount (Jesus is different from Brian!), and we are immediately reminded of Moses and his giving the Law from the mountain.

In Luke's gospel (Lk. 6:20-21), Jesus gives his teaching on a level place and there are three blessings and three woes, they're all practical – blessed are the poor, woe to the rich; blessed are the hungry, woe to the satisfied; blessed are those who mourn, woe to those who rejoice. It's a very political and social manifesto, designed particularly for the poor and the oppressed.

But, we are following Matthew because Matthew has eight Beatitudes and they are inscribed on the eight arches here in the Chapel. And, often he is seen

as more 'spiritual'. Last week, we looked at 'the poor in spirit', and in a couple of weeks' time, we'll come on to those who hunger and thirst for righteousness. So, the accusation is - has Matthew dumbed down or anaesthetised the radical message of Jesus, making it nice and spiritual, not just about the poor and hungry but those who are poor in spirit or those who are hungry for righteousness' sake?

The order of the Beatitudes can look a little confusing. There is one order in the gospel, there is a different order here on the arches and there is a different order in the Chapel term card.

Starting on the bottom right arch, we see the first Beatitude, '*Blessed are the poor in spirit*' that we looked at last week, then we cut across to the bottom left arch to see the second, '*Blessed are those who mourn*', then back to the right for the third, '*Blessed are the meek*' which we are looking at today, then across again for the fourth, '*Blessed are those who hunger and thirst for righteousness*', then back again for the fifth, '*Blessed are the merciful*', then we have the sixth, '*Blessed are the pure in heart*' and then does seven and eight. But, it is interesting to me that 'the poor in spirit' and 'the meek' are next to one another on the arches, in the same way in which Tim has put them next to one another in the order for this term, because, actually, they fit together very well.

'Blessed are the poor in spirit, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven' (Matt. 5:3); *'Blessed are the meek, for they will inherit the earth'* (Matt. 5:5). This is a Hebrew parallelism, the kind of thing we find all the time in the Psalms. Think of Ps. 8:4, *'what is man that you are mindful of him, and the son of man that you care for him?'* It's often a way of saying the same thing in different words, and it happens all the way through the Psalms and all the way through the Prophets, and so on. In Ps. 37:10 we read, *'In just a little while, the wicked will be no more; though you look carefully at his place, he will not be there.'* The second half mirrors the first, and this gives us the whole history of Anglican chant where Psalms are sung backwards and forwards in two halves across cathedrals and in places like this chapel.

So, if originally, perhaps, they may have formed a Hebrew parallelism, does this give us an idea about what 'meek' really means? Jesus says, *'Blessed are the poor in spirit, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven'* (Matt. 5:3); *'Blessed are the meek, for they will inherit the earth'* (Matt. 5:5). Well, we've seen the confusion already in *Life of Brian* with the classic idea, *'Blessed are the*

cheesemakers', which is what is misheard by those at the back (as opposed to *'Blessed are the peacemakers'*), and that wonderful parody of the guy who in the scripture is called Gregory, a wealthy man, who, when asked by Mrs Gregory, *'Ahh, what's so special about the cheesemakers?'*, replies, *'Well, obviously, this is not meant to be taken literally. It refers to any manufacturers of dairy products.'* And, then, a man mishears and quotes, *'Blessed are the Greek'* (as opposed to *'Blessed are the meek'*), and Mrs Big Nose corrects him and replies, *'Oh, it's the meek! Blessed are the meek! Oh, that's nice, isn't it? I'm glad they're getting something, 'cause they have a hell of a time.'* Who are these meek and why are they having a hell of a time?

'Blessed are the meek' (Matt. 5:5), which in Greek reads: μακάριοι οἱ πραεῖς. The Greek word for meek, *'praeis'*, is used a lot to translate in this Greek version of the Old Testament, the Septuagint, the Hebrew *'anawim'* – the humble poor. And, we have that also in Ps. 37:11, *'But the meek shall inherit the land and delight themselves in abundant peace'*, again it's the *'anawim'*, the humble poor, who shall inherit the land. And, this Hebrew word, *'anawim'*, is often also translated by the word *'ptōxós'*, οἱ πτωχοὶ, which means 'beggar' or 'poor' and this was the focus of last week's sermon. *'Blessed are the poor in spirit'* (Matt. 5:3), *'Blessed are the meek'* (Matt. 5:5) - both of these words are used to translate the same Hebrew term, and to make it absolutely clear, Matthew adds to *'ptōxós'*, 'beggar', 'poor', with τῷ πνεύματι, Greek for 'in spirit', and it is the 'poor in spirit' who are connected to the humble poor. So, we're back to the parallelism. Actually, the people who are being blessed are the same people, 'the poor in spirit' and 'the meek' are both the same translation of the Hebrew word *'anawim'*, and that's the word that is used for the humble poor throughout the Old Testament. The humble poor, those who have to trust God for everything, as opposed to the proud rich, the confident, those who are trusting in their own resources and who know it all - hence Gregory and his exposition of scripture. As Mrs Big Nose says about the meek, *'they have a hell of a time'!*

Well, if 'the poor in spirit' and 'the meek' represent different ways of referring to the same thing, is it possible that this is also the case with *'the kingdom of heaven'* (Matt. 5:3), and *'inherit the earth'* (Matt. 5:5) or *'inherit the land'* (Ps. 37:11).

The word 'inherit', of course, for us sounds like something that happens after someone dies – what you get is a bequest or a legacy. The actual word in the

Greek, *'klēronoméō'*, refers to an 'allotment' – not where you go off and grow your vegetables! – but, how the land was divided up, by lot, and different tribes had their allotted share. This word is used throughout the Old Testament for the allotment, or the allotted sections, of the Promised Land and the earth and you will find this in Deuteronomy 4:1 & 16:20 and right across the Psalms (notably, Ps. 68:36). Also, this word is often translated not as 'inherit', but as 'possess'. So, we have this Hebrew parallel, that the poor get the kingdom of heaven and the meek get the land.

What we actually have here are different ways of saying the same thing. The humble poor, the downtrodden, the oppressed, the hungry, the marginalised – they are the ones who turn to God and who receive God's blessings and his gifts because they have nowhere else to turn and they are special and precious to God.

Throughout Ps. 37, which we had read earlier, we are told not to fret because of the wicked and wrongdoers (verse 1), but instead to trust in the Lord and do good and you will live in the land (verse 3). Or, in verses 7-8, *'Be still before the LORD, and wait patiently for him; do not fret over those who prosper in their way, over those who carry out evil devices. Refrain from anger, and forsake wrath. Do not fret—it leads only to evil'*. And, then, the Psalmist gives the warning that it is God's job to deal with the wicked, *'For the wicked shall be cut off, but those who wait for the LORD shall inherit the land. Yet a little while, and the wicked will be no more; though you look diligently for their place, they will not be there. But the meek shall inherit the land, and delight in abundant prosperity'* (verses 9-11).

So, maybe Matthew is not spiritualising or dumbing down or politicising Jesus' message – and it's not so different from Luke, after all. Luke is being blunt for Gentiles with his references to the 'poor' and 'hungry' and 'mourning' – Matthew is writing for readers who are attuned to the language of the Septuagint (LXX), the Greek version of Hebrew scriptures, and they would immediately recognise these words and phrases about the 'poor' and 'meek' and 'inheriting (or possessing) the land'.

And, what Jesus is saying in this Beatitude, and there is an argument that this runs through all of the Beatitudes, is that he challenges our notion of power and authority – those who are jealous of their position, and looking for a fight – and I thought it was really interesting in the *Life of Brian* that this was

perfectly demonstrated by that spat between Eric Idle's 'Mr Cheeky' and Michael Palin's 'Mr Big Nose'.

What about Trump and Kim Jong Un? Again, squaring up and making threats at one other. What about the Middle East? And, what about all the other places where those who are the powerful are looking or spoiling for a fight. Who gets hurt when the big men fight – so often, of course, the woman and the children. And, again it's interesting that when Michael Palin's 'Mr Big Nose' turns to punch Eric Idle's 'Mr Cheeky', he ends up hitting Gregory's wife.

Yes, Tim, I will admit that there are times when the Dean throws his weight around (and we know that there is plenty of it to throw around!). But, Jesus models a different way of being. A different way of leading, a different way of trying to bring things about. In Matt 11.29, he says, *'Take my yoke upon you, and learn from me; for I am gentle and humble in heart, and you will find rest for your souls.'* For 'gentle', he uses the word *'praeis'*, the word for 'meek'. Jesus describes himself with exactly the word that he blesses as 'the meek'. In Matthew's account of Jesus entering Jerusalem, it reads, *'Tell the daughter of Zion, Look, your king is coming to you, humble, and mounted on a donkey, and on a colt, the foal of a donkey.'* For 'humble', Matthew uses the word *'praeis'*. Jesus models a way of being 'meek' and 'poor in spirit' and 'humble' and 'trusting God', and he commends that to us.

In conclusion, I want to suggest that, like our two arches here in Chapel, Tim is quite right to put these two together – the 'poor in spirit' and the 'meek' belong together – and are, simply, two ways of referring to the 'humble poor', those who put their trust in God, those who find as their reward nothing less than the Promised Land, the Kingdom of Heaven.

Can we learn to live differently? Can I learn to live differently? To not be like Mr Big Nose, looking for a fight. And, that is a challenge to us, to those around us, and our society – that if we want to be truly blessed, we have to find different ideas of what it means to be successful, be a leader, not fighting, but trusting God.

Amen.