

## **'The kingdom of heaven can come near'**

**Cathedral Eucharist, Sunday 5<sup>th</sup> November, 2017**

**All Saints Sunday, Yr A**

*Sermon by the Rev'd Dr Mike Kirby, Priest-Vicar (SSM), Chester Cathedral*

*Revelation 7:9-17; Matthew 5:1-12*

May I speak in the name of God, Father, Son and Holy Spirit; Amen

The kingdom of heaven can come near

It has been a difficult week in the university for our final year students; their final year or semester has begun....the realities of being more autonomous in their clinical and academic work are dawning upon them – as is the fact that soon they will be out into the big wide world, serving our patients themselves, being that team that does save lives. But this week has been a little bit more difficult than usual – because we have had to turn their attention from teaching of how things can be right in our clinical world, to what happens when things go wrong. The stark realities of clinical incidents that can happen – and in particular, under our UK legislation, the responsibility that each of them will have; to the extent that failing and being negligent may not only have clinical consequences, but they can be prosecuted too. It's a stark reality, a wake-up call for some – and my colleague and I teach it from a perspective of having been there and done it; for my colleague having been involved in an incident personally, and myself having investigated a number of them over the years. The external scrutiny and investigation by UK legislation is tough and unpleasant – but not nearly as difficult as being personally involved, or the consequences.

But the whole purpose of teaching it is not about scaring our students – but about informing them; why we report, why we individually take responsibility, what the systems we have in place are designed to do. It is about individual responsibility within a system which allows open reporting – so that we report the smallest of near-misses, in order to avoid the big incidents; it minimises the risk of the major incidents – and indeed this is what our systems now achieve. We learn openly from what could be mistakes, the ones we catch and the less significant ones – so our treatments and systems get better and better. It's about owning up, so we can learn from the mistakes – and thereby keep moving forward from the present to a future clinical service which is vastly improved – for the benefit of our single most important aspect....our patients; the persons we serve with care and compassion; with love.

For me, the beatitudes is all about that sense of moving forward, being forward looking; that examination of the present....with a view to what the future will be; contrasting the difficulties and imperfections of current life and then showing what the kingdom of God will bring, what it will be like. As part of this glorious Sermon on the Mount, this is perhaps one of the most positive aspects – identifying that the present times are far from perfect, but realising what the future times – a time in God's kingdom – will be like.

I say realising because that is in fact what Jesus did, with care and compassion; with love. He was, as this whole picture in Matthew paints, the ultimate teacher – his words always so powerful, so poignant and yet so full of grace and love at heart. He is grace-full, in all senses of the word. For the picture that Matthew portrays in his gospel is one of a moral model – Jesus does not merely say these things, he teaches from experience and by experience....the whole Sermon on the Mount, the whole of Jesus' ministry proclaims in

Jesus the likeness of the God of Israel, through his virtues, his words and his deeds.

His lesson plan here, so to speak, suffuses today's trials and tribulations with what tomorrow will bring, in the kingdom of heaven, God's kingdom. There is always a picture of the present current trials, juxtaposed with the radically different situation of God's future...the world that will come. The text reaches back to the past – the past that they know so well from the scriptures, making links with the Old Testament prophets, affirming Jesus as the fulfiller of those prophecies. Jesus' words mirror sections in Isaiah in speaking of good news for the poor; comforting those who mourn and the inheritance of the earth – but an earth made afresh and renewed once it is fully in God's hands.

This is not what might be, this is reality – this is what will happen, and Jesus, and his deeds, are the embodiment of it. Matthew paints an image which shows the Christology of Jesus....here now is someone who goes beyond the prophet; the words uttered are from the anointed one himself; anointed, suffused, filled with the spirit bringing the good news to all in the words of the sermon and in the action of his life. The news is, for example, for those who are presently poor in spirit and the meek – for theirs will be the greatest of rewards; the earth made new into the kingdom of heaven. The future is one of eschatological reversal, when the injustices of this world will be overturned in the eternal kingdom. Those at present without power and status, who depend the most upon God, theirs will be the most glorious of gifts when things are changed, at the last. The wicked who seem to prosper now, and the saints among us all, who do not – the story will be very different in the future....true riches will be the prosperity of the poor and weak. The righteousness that the saints hunger for, that we all hunger for, is

not vindication and recrimination, but the right conduct that God wants us all to follow, to take to heart – that is the goal which lies ahead, that we should all be seeking, moving forward towards. The pureness in heart may be an inner and outward harmony which brings upon us an intent to always strive to do God's will, not our own....and in that way, we shall indeed see God.

Throughout them all, we are called to become what the beatitudes praise – but once again, it is not by imperative; as always there is no force applied. But hope is offered – through a lens into God's future, the feeling of hope is engendered, making the present tolerable. But is it? Is that really truly felt for all of us, in our present time? I wonder....for those in the present that we are all aware of, who have such difficulties, who suffer such injustice and wrongdoing, how can they keep focused on something that may seem so far in the future – whilst striving to do God's will, how can they see God now or in the future?

Well maybe the work of Jesus in realising the kingdom in the here and now may help us see the way to helping others....in the here and now. So that the kingdom of heaven can come that little bit closer....in the present day. For me, it needs realising in both senses of the word; our eyes must be opened to see the things happening around us, to learn from the mistakes of the past and realise what we need to do, not just say, as disciples of Christ. And by that doing, we help to realise, to make real, just a glimpse of God's future kingdom by what we do now. It is, like what we teach to our students, a sense of responsibility – our responsibility as disciples of Jesus.....not to wait for the eternal kingdom – for people around us need to feel some of that kingdom now, so that they can see a future eternal kingdom.

So just as we have tried to teach our own students about their responsibility to their patients, the ones they will serve - it is our responsibility now as disciples to learn from the past, from the mistakes and from the near-misses; to help society move forward from the difficulties of the present in order to realise a better future....but not in some far distant time – but a little bit, right here and right now, for those in need around us. That means opening our eyes to the realities of, for example, modern slavery happening on our doorsteps; and learning how to take action. It is about seeing the plight of the refugees and those displaced through no fault of their own....and offering the hand of friendship and love. It is about seeing the ones on our streets, who are struggling with finances, food, places to stay – and buying that extra little bit of food for the foodbanks and shelters, rather than ourselves.

The responsibility is not a theoretical or academic exercise, it is a reality; and in the same way we teach others from our own experiences, we need to do the same as Jesus – to teach by example. The future kingdom is clear to us, but we need to bring it near now for those who cannot see it and have little hope of it. If we do so, we can be that blessed gift to others – so that the kingdom of heaven can indeed come near.....realised in the here and now; in Jesus' name.

Amen