

SERMON – ASH WEDNESDAY 2022

So as we begin this sacred journey of Lent together let's just remind ourselves of these words from Friar Dominique.

"Lent is a retreat that the Church gives us ... in order to re-focus on what should be first in our lives. (Fr. Dominique, OSJ)

Lent is a time of going back to the basics. An opportunity to reflect on the core fundamentals of our Christian faith. A opportunity to remind ourselves of how we need to keep the main thing, the main thing.

I don't think there's any doubt that all things Covid have taken so many of us to a place of questioning some of things we may have put first in our lives. I know that I now look with a much more critical gaze at some of the value systems and institutions that have been the framework of the Western world throughout my lifetime. Things that I've taken for granted and taken on good faith have been shaken and stirred.

But I've also looked far more closely at the attitudes of my own heart and the need to recognise the poverty of my needs. Where have I compromised on the more challenging aspects of what it means to truly follow the way of Christ?

And **what about you?** What have been some of your insights, realisations and recognitions of these past 2 years. Lent is the opportunity for all of us to open ourselves up to the Spirit's searching and guiding, so we can take this interior journey to an even deeper place in Christ.



SO WHY THE BEATITUDES FOR LENT? Well it's that wisdom of going back to the basics. The spirit of keeping the main thing, the main thing.

For us as Christians, central to the journey of Lent, is the journey to the Cross. And central to the Cross of course, is the person of Jesus Christ. Jesus Christ is the main thing.

And what was the main thing for Jesus Christ? Well Jesus told us in Luke 4:43 and many other verses. **"I must preach the good news of the kingdom of God because for this I was sent. I was sent for this purpose."**

And as we know, Jesus spent his entire ministry proclaiming that this Kingdom of God way and truth was 'breaking in'. And if you want to know what it looks like said Jesus, "look at me". I AM the way and truth of this Kingdom of God.

But then Jesus gave all His followers a 'main thing' wisdom.



He told us to **Seek ye first the kingdom God**. Do this above all else, and then everything that is **of God**, will flow from this.

And where did Jesus most fully paint the picture of what this Kingdom of God 'Way' actually looked like, when lived out? Well, most scholars will tell you quite rightly in a heartbeat, that it was in the Sermon on the Mount. This was Jesus' masterpiece sermon. **And what was the main thing of the Sermon of the Mount?** It was the Beatitudes. Again, as scholars will tell you, The Beatitudes are the **essence of the essence** of Jesus teachings. They are Jesus Magna Carta.

And I can't think of a time in my lifetime and certainly in my Christian lifetime, when these beautiful life-giving qualities of what it means to be truly human, have been so desperately needed. As you survey the emotional and spiritual fallout, of all that's going down in the world ... when did you last witness a humanity, so clearly in a state of emotional and spiritual dislocation?

But the main thing of our Christian faith of course is hope. And the hope that we believe in lies in the light of Christ. And central to this Hope is a Church that lives out the salt and light of these beautiful Beatitudes.

The Beatitudes isn't Jesus saying... "here's a few good ideas for life guys, why don't you give them a bit of a go and see what happens." **They are announcements by Jesus of a radical reordering of assumed values.** The assumed values that have so dominated and permeated every aspect of society and who we are.

Even for Christians, the Beatitudes can cause us to feel conflicted. We recognise their beauty and truth, but we also recognise the challenge and cost of aspiring to live them out. But if we don't feel unsettled by the Beatitudes it's probably because we haven't really taken on their full significance.

The journey of Lent itself is based on the 40 days and nights of Jesus in the desert wilderness, and His time of great trial and testing. Have you ever wondered... why scripture tells us that the Holy Spirit leads Jesus (or as it says in Marks gospel) **drive** Jesus into the desert for his momentous time of challenge and testing? **What was really taking place in this pivotal time for Jesus?**

What was taking place, is that Jesus had to get it straight in his own heart, what He needed to put first in His life. Jesus had to get clear what this Kingdom of God **WAS** and what it was **NOT**. And like all of us, Jesus was tested by the voice of the one who

tempts and seduces us to seek a different kind of Kingdom. The way that is so seductive and so often so dominant in this world.

But as we know Jesus resisted and rebuked these attempts to deflect him from the way and call of His Father God. And he emerged from his time of great testing and trial to preach and most importantly **live out** the beautiful way of these Beatitudes.

Every one of these Beatitude attitudes are the hallmark of Jesus ministry. And Jesus lived every one of them all the way to the Cross. Not once, did Jesus flinch from keeping the main thing, the main thing. And He was prepared to die rather than compromise the truth of these beautiful Beatitudes.

So I ask again, how urgent is the need for all of humanity to grasp the deep and profound truth of these counter-cultural, counter intuitive ways of what it means to be truly human?

That if we are not the **peacemakers**, if we are not **merciful**, if we are not **meek and gentle with a servant heart**. If we fail to hunger and thirst for all that is just and right, with pure and noble hearts, then we can never become the humanity that God created us to be. **And how urgent is it, that the Church of Christ lives out the main thing of Christ in this world today?**

So as a way of we as a St George's community entering this journey of Lent together, with open hearts let's just unpack the very first one of the Beatitudes. Because there's a very good reason why the first one is the first one. The Beatitudes are not just a bunch of random sayings. Study them and there is a natural spiritual flow.



Blessed are the poor in spirit, says Jesus. 2 things to unpack.

Firstly, what does Jesus actually mean by being "poor in spirit"?

Well, different scholars find different emphasises, but the dominant perspective is that being 'poor in spirit' ... is when we have a 'poverty of need'. A poverty of spirit. Whatever that poverty or need may be.

Secondly, why are we are blessed?

We are blessed, because it's when we reach this point of **recognising** our poverty of need that we can become more open to God working in our lives. From a place of humility and surrender, we can allow Christ to meet us in our poverty of need.

Its why I love Eugene Paterson Message translation so much.

“You’re blessed when you’re at the end of your rope. Because with less of you, there is more room for God and his rule. All of us will have experienced the truth of this.

We reach a place of rock bottom. ‘**Undone**’ as Chris said a few weeks back. We feel helpless and powerless and so where is the only place we can go? It’s to the place of God’s mercy. All our illusions of self-sufficiency and somehow being in control, are stripped away and all we can do, is fall into the safety net of God’s transforming grace.

We are blessed said Jesus, because now we can begin to let go and let God, be God in our lives. And I’ve experienced the full power of this so many times in my life, but it’s a truth I seem to constantly need to be reminded of and re-learn. To let the Kingdom of God, invade the Kingdom of Josh.

And this is the essence, the heartbeat and the spirit of Lent. And it begins with this deeply profound night of Ash Wednesday. We come and we recognise our own mortality, our own fragility and our need for God. We recognise that we are deeply loved and deeply worthy, but deeply in need of Christ.

So as you come forward in a moment, for the sign of the Cross and the placing of the ashes on your forehead... bring your poverty of need.

What might you be putting first in your life before God?

Where might you need the strength of Christ, to live out more these beautiful Beatitudes?

Where might you be at the end of your rope. A place of feeling powerless and helpless.

All things Covid has taken so many of us to a place where we recognise more our poverty of need.

As you come forward for the sign of the Cross, remember the words of Jesus and this first Beatitude.

That we are blessed, because now Christ will meet us in our place of need and begin our journey of healing. Amen