**Matthew 5: 1-12**

**The Beatitudes**

1 When Jesus saw the crowds, he went up the mountain; and after he sat down, his disciples came to him.

2 Then he began to speak, and taught them, saying:

3 “Blessed are the poor in spirit, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven.

4 “Blessed are those who mourn, for they will be comforted.

5 “Blessed are the meek, for they will inherit the earth.

6 “Blessed are those who hunger and thirst for righteousness, for they will be filled.

7 “Blessed are the merciful, for they will receive mercy.

8 “Blessed are the pure in heart, for they will see God.

9 “Blessed are the peacemakers, for they will be called children of God.

10 “Blessed are those who are persecuted for righteousness’ sake, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven.

11 “Blessed are you when people revile you and persecute you and utter all kinds of evil against you falsely on my account.

12 Rejoice and be glad, for your reward is great in heaven, for in the same way they persecuted the prophets who were before you.

The Beatitudes – those parts of Christ teaching that we have heard in today’s Gospel Reading – are, to my ears and my heart, are among the most beautiful parts of the Bible. I tell you, I can hardly read them without tears of sheer longing. Hearing them – and doing so with an inkling of understanding played a large part in my becoming a Christian at all, some 17 years ago. I was a lovely, comfortable, pipe-smoking, liberal, intellectual agnostic before that.

The first thing about their teaching that struck me is that it seemed to be to be importantly new. I knew something of the ethics of ancient Greece. I have taught about Aristotle, whom I admired – and still do in my philosophy classes - but the Beatitudes seemed to me to be preaching something more expansive. They provided a new light. This moral teaching was not coming from any fallen human philosopher, I decided. It could not arise from a mere wine-fuelled civilised conversation of any kind. These teachings, I discerned, could have one possible source only – God!

And what is God telling us in them? Two or three things just struck me about them. They are not orders or instructions. (I’m sorry Christopher Hitchens, but if you can hear me from your grave, the Christian faith is not a divine North Korea.) Nor are they simply moral codes, though they must inform our behaviour towards one another. I don’t go in much for moral codes as they are usually conceived, in any case. Moral codes tend to obstruct us from the path of righteousness.

Neither, ladies and gentlemen, are they an instance of that more popular genre of our own day - ‘recommended guidelines for good practice’. So let us dispense with all of that.

But if not that, what are they? They are, l&g, fundamental truths about the deep nature of reality. That is, they tell us something about the deep nature and meaning of divine creation. They tell us what God creates. Putting it bluntly, Jesus is telling us how things *are.* But part of this is indeed telling us about consequences – consequences of both accepting these truths and of rejecting them. If we want to be happy - ‘blessed’ is the usual word - then we must acknowledge them and, indeed, *heed* them. Ignoring the beatitudes is rather like ignoring the law of gravity – jump out of a aeroplane aloft without a parachute and you are as like as not going to lose your earthly life. Ignore the beatitudes and one is going to lose even more – one will oose God and lose eternal life.

For example, weare told that “Blessed are ‘the poor in spirit”, But how? Not because it is holy to put oneself down. (That’s just false modesty.) Nor is it because it is good to grovel and cower (That is what many ‘new atheists’ seem to think we Christians have to do before God.)

No! It is because we are required to acknowledge that our very on-going existence depends on God’s continuing grace. One thing we are being told here is that it is a very bad idea for us to imagine that we are the measure of all things. We are the measure of nothing, l&g - *God* is! God is telling us that his grace is built into the very fabric of reality. This is what I learned. Have fun l&g discerning what the other beatitudes mean, for I must keep this short.

But remember: this is how the world is created to be. This is how reality really is. Denying reality, l&g, has always been a really bad idea. And in this context – the most vital of all – denial is lethal. So, perhaps we had better celebrate it instead. *Amen*