

Matthew 5:1-2, 9-16

Mark 8:31-38

Matthew 5 ¹Now when Jesus saw the crowds, he went up on a mountainside and sat down. His disciples came to him, ² and he began to teach them. He said:

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

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

¹¹ 'Blessed are you when people insult you, persecute you and falsely say all kinds of evil against you because of me. ¹² Rejoice and be glad, because great is your reward in heaven, for in the same way they persecuted the prophets who were before you.

¹³ 'You are the salt of the earth. But if the salt loses its saltiness, how can it be made salty again? It is no longer good for anything, except to be thrown out and trampled underfoot.

¹⁴ 'You are the light of the world. A town built on a hill cannot be hidden. ¹⁵ Neither do people light a lamp and put it under a bowl. Instead they put it on its stand, and it gives light to everyone in the house. ¹⁶ In the same way, let your light shine before others, that they may see your good deeds and glorify your Father in heaven.

Mark 8 ³¹ He then began to teach them that the Son of Man must suffer many things and be rejected by the elders, the chief priests and the teachers of the law, and that he must be killed and after three days rise again. ³² He spoke plainly about this, and Peter took him aside and began to rebuke him.

³³ But when Jesus turned and looked at his disciples, he rebuked Peter. 'Get behind me, Satan!' he said. 'You do not have in mind the concerns of God, but merely human concerns.'

³⁴ Then he called the crowd to him along with his disciples and said: 'Whoever wants to be my disciple must deny themselves and take up their cross and follow me. ³⁵ For whoever wants to save their life will lose it, but whoever loses their life for me and for the gospel will save it. ³⁶ What good is it for someone to gain the whole world, yet forfeit their soul? ³⁷ Or what can anyone give in exchange for their soul? ³⁸ If anyone is ashamed of me and my words in this adulterous and sinful generation, the Son of Man will be ashamed of them when he comes in his Father's glory with the holy angels.'

For us human beings there are often times when we are afraid: not just physical fear in the face of a particular danger – maybe when faced with some lunatic driver on the road, but other fears: of losing our job, of losing a loved one, for the future of our children or grandchildren, not having financial security, not keeping our health, afraid of death

In Advent and Christmas there are a lot of angels: to Zechariah, father of John the Baptist, Mary, Joseph, the shepherds. Every time *Don't be afraid*. With Zechariah and the shepherds, it was because they were afraid of the angel, but with Mary and then Joseph, it was more like don't be afraid to serve God and surrender your will to him. Mary don't be afraid to have God's son as a baby, don't be afraid of the scandal etc. Ditto Joseph re marrying Mary. Dozens of times in the gospels, Jesus tells the disciples *Don't be afraid*, right from when he first calls Peter, Andrew, James in Luke 5: "Don't be afraid; from now on you will fish for people." through to the risen Lord Jesus, telling the disciples not to be afraid but to tell the others and to meet him in Galilee. It seems that to follow Jesus takes particular courage.

Jesus himself showed enormous courage. Jesus courageous in his teaching and actions, knowing that it would stir up trouble with the religious and political leaders. Above all, as he set himself with steely determination on a course that he knew would take him to the cross. But he makes it clear that if we want to follow him we too must take up our cross as we heard Jess Mark 8 vv. 34 ff. 'Whoever wants to be my disciple must deny themselves and take up their cross and follow me.

There is a danger of reducing following Christ to simply "being nice". *When our values become detached from following Christ, we end up with a diluted, timid Christianity*. Being nice, does not require courage, but taking up our cross and following Christ does. It takes courage for various reasons: one being because we are called like Jesus to be peacemakers. *Blessed are the peacemakers for they will be called children of God*.

Jesus is the Prince of Peace but the peace he came to make was primarily between his fellow human beings and his heavenly Father. St Paul writes in his letter to the Colossians ¹⁹ *For God was pleased ... through him to reconcile to himself all things, ..., by making peace through his blood, shed on the cross* It always takes courage to be a peacemaker, between two enemies – to stand in the gap and

reach out to both sides but that is what Jesus did for us on the cross. Paul reminds us in the very next verse: ²¹ *Once you were alienated from God and were enemies in your minds because of your evil behaviour.* Jesus brings together a holy God with unholy people like you and me by paying the price for our unholiness on the cross.

And now having reconciled us, he calls us also to be peacemakers, to seek to reconcile people like us, but who are still *alienated from God*, who maybe don't believe he exists or if they do, don't want to know him, or who are fearful of him. And it takes courage to do that: when you stand in the gap, there is always a danger that you get caught in the cross-fire. Jesus knew how difficult it would be for his disciples, that just like him they would not always be well-received: in our Beatitudes reading, he talks about *people insulting them, persecuting them and falsely saying all kinds of evil against them because of Him.*

You and I have had the unusual privilege of being born into a society which had over many centuries been infused with Christian principles and values, so up to now we may well have not experienced persecution – but this is unusual in the long history of the Christian church. In other parts of the world, in the Middle East, Pakistan, Indonesia, Burma, China, parts of North Africa it is very dangerous to be a Christian. (*my Open Doors bracelet*).

And the situation is changing rapidly in our own country is well. We have now had at least one generation where the vast majority have had almost no Christian teaching, which means that for most of the new generation of children now growing up, Christianity is some weird religious sect. Most of the media and now many political leaders will often see Christians as a strange minority who irrationally believe in God and that Jesus Christ is his son. They are, in the words of the Bible, alienated from God, and our job is to be peacemakers, by encouraging them to look at Christ and to open their hearts to him.

How do we do this? Well Jesus says by not hiding our light under a bowl, but putting it on a stand; in other words, being open and honest about our faith. Jesus then paints a picture of a city filled with light on a hill, to remind us that we are not just called to do this alone but as a community, a family, a church.

People may be alienated from God, but Jesus commanded his disciples and us always to approach them with an attitude of blessing and peace: *Matthew 10 v.12 As you enter the home, give it your greeting. (This would have been "Shalom Aleichem" Peace be upon you.)* ¹³ *If the home is deserving, let your peace rest on it; if it is not, let your peace return to you.* in other words: *Go with a desire to bless and bring peace, but if people are not interested, don't panic.*

Reaching out to others takes courage; and the huge question is how do we get that courage – how do we become more courageous – especially as we increasingly face, if not actual persecution, ridicule or scorn or a hostile response? As usual, we find the answer in the gospels: especially in the story of Jesus being with the disciples in a boat in the midst of a violent storm: *Matthew 8: He replied, 'You of little faith, why are you so afraid?' Then he got up and rebuked the winds and the waves, and it was completely calm.* or in Mark's version: *Jesus said to his disciples, 'Why are you so afraid? Do you still have no faith?' i.e the disciples were afraid because they had no faith in Jesus, or not enough faith. They didn't at this stage really believe that Jesus would protect them and keep them safe.*

We fear when we don't have enough faith. But when we *have* faith, when we begin to believe that God is God and He loves us unconditionally and that he is watching over us, then fear subsides. It doesn't mean that he will always keep us safe, but it does mean that he will never abandon us and his longing and desire is to bless us. St John writes that perfect love casts out fear.

Jesus promises we will be blessed. When we have the courage to be peacemakers, we shall be called children of God. God will call you his child – *my beloved son, my beloved daughter.* When we have the courage to remain faithful to Christ and to stand up for what is right and true even though it leads to insults, slanders or worse, we shall enjoy the kingdom of heaven and our reward will be great. Whilst we might only enjoy these blessings in all their fulness when our earthly life ends, we will have a foretaste of those blessings here and now. That deep assurance that we are here and now God's beloved children, and a foretaste of the love, grace, community and peace which come with the Kingdom of Heaven plus many other rewards along the way.

So, if we want to be the people God created us to be, we need to be more courageous. And if we want to be more courageous, we need to grow in our faith which means taking Jesus at his word and trusting in his promises. It means focussing our minds and hearts not on the temporary and hollow blessings of this world, but on the far deeper blessings of God's love for us and all that He promises us in His kingdom.