

Epiphany 4 Matthew 5:1-12

After a woman sued McDonalds because she wasn't warned her coffee was hot, it seems that companies are changing their instruction manuals and product warning labels to cover themselves from product liability.. Listen to a few of these:

On a frozen dinner- Suggestion: Defrost before eating;

Shop bought bread pudding- Product will be hot after heating;

Iron- Caution, do not iron clothes on body;

On a string of Christmas lights- For indoor or outdoor use only;

A packet of peanuts - May contain peanuts;

On a blanket - Not to be used as protection from a tornado;

On a motorcycle helmet mounted mirror- Remember, objects in the mirror are actually behind you;

It seems that we are surrounded by instructions that are meant to help us have happy, healthy, trouble free lives. The Bible also comes with several sets of instructions and today we heard some of them in the gospel. These particular instructions are known as the beatitudes and are widely recognised by Christians and also non-Christians in our society.

But just because we have heard them many times do we really understand what they mean? It is often the case with things we have heard many times or only in passing that we think they know what's being said without giving them due consideration. Here is an alternative list of what people hear in the beatitudes and compare that to what we actually have in the Bible.

We hear: Blessed are the poor. Rather than: Blessed are the poor in spirit.

We hear: Blessed are those who are never happy. Rather than: Blessed are those who mourn.

We hear: Blessed are the weak. Rather than: Blessed are the meek.

We hear: Blessed are the starving. Rather than: Blessed are those who hunger and thirst for righteousness.

We hear: Blessed are those who are doormats for others. Rather than: Blessed are those who show mercy.

We hear: Blessed are those who are self-righteous. Rather than: Blessed are the pure in heart.

We hear: Blessed are those who sit on the fence. Rather than: Blessed are the peacemakers.

We hear: Blessed are those who are victimised. Rather than: Blessed are those who are persecuted in the cause of right.

Now our potential misinterpretation of these verses can cause us, as Christians, some confusion. The world tells us that everything in the alternative set of beatitudes is to be avoided in ourselves and pitied in others. We don't want to be poor, or unhappy or weak and so on, we should make sure we are not those things and strive to help others not to be those things either. And if that is how we read these instructions we can feel pulled in opposite directions by the God and the world.

However, if we look deeply at the meaning of these instructions, we see that the confusion is much less. Jesus was not suggesting that we all need to be in poverty, starving, unhappy, refusing to stand up and be counted on issues for fear of not being a peacemaker and not being meek. To be poor in spirit is to understand that we need God to feed our spiritual wellbeing, it has nothing to do with our bank account. We all mourn, we all have had experiences of sadness and loss Jesus is not suggesting that we should live our lives being as miserable about that as possible, he is just acknowledging that we have sadness and that God will comfort us. We are not being told to be weak, meekness in the image of Jesus is the strongest position imaginable. For Jesus, in his meekness, to ignore his own desires and fears and deliberately and knowingly take up the cross and allow himself to be crucified for our sins is something that bears no resemblance to an act of weakness.

Those who hunger and thirst for righteousness are those who will not rest until injustices no longer occur, it has nothing to do with dinner. Showing mercy is not about being a pushover. It is about understanding that God is love but God is also just and acknowledging that we are often in no position to judge the actions of others and our best course of action is forgiveness in the hope that we, too will be forgiven our sins which we will commit.

The pure in heart are not those who are self-righteous, they are those who strive to live their lives with pure intentions but who understand that they are not perfect. The peacemakers are not those unwilling back one side over another, that doesn't end disputes. Rather they are those who can deal with disputes sensitively so that whatever the outcome, all sides feel they have been treated fairly and can continue to love one another even if there are issues they disagree on.

We are certainly not called to be victims. There are examples of Christians throughout the ages who have been persecuted and have continued in their faith with pride and commitment. That is what Jesus wants for us. What sort of witness would we give if every time we were persecuted we fell apart and were no longer able to show that we gain strength through our faith? If that happens the persecutors have been successful.

The beatitudes can make us feel very insecure when we take time to really look at them, we can feel as though the world in which we live today makes it impossible for us to live up to these aspirational qualities. But these are achievable characteristics, as Christians we are all called to aspire to them, ordained persons, lay persons, all the baptised, none of us are

exempt if we are striving to live Christian lives. We are also called to follow all of these instructions. This is sometimes a little harder, but we can't pick and choose the bits that suit us. It is no good being a great activist for fair trade as someone who hungers and thirsts for righteousness if you leave a trail of upset and disgruntled people behind you, that would ignore your responsibility as a peacemaker.

No one is suggesting that this is easy, but when did Jesus ever say that following Him would be easy? The second part of each of the beatitudes details the reward for following the instructions and the rewards are of God, of heaven and not of this world. The rewards are to be part of the communion of saints. We have our instruction manual, it is far more sensible than some of the instructions with which we began, so let's take them seriously and start following them for happy, spiritually healthy and inspired lives, earthly and beyond.

Amen.