

Service prepared by Rev Sheena Gabriel - 29th March 20 – for Godalming Unitarians

Today was advertised as one of our Alternative 5th Sunday services - on the Beatitudes – this is a shortened version for use at home. (I will be offering this service via Zoom at 11am for those who are able to join me online)

Opening words & lighting the chalice

If you have a candle to hand you may want to light it

(You may also like to have 8 tea-lights to hand for later in the service)

May the light we now kindle,
inspire us to use our power to heal and not to harm,
to help and not to hinder,
to bless and not to curse,
and to serve the greater good, in all our actions and words *(adapted from Jewish tradition)*

Opening Reading from Matthew's Gospel ch. 5 v.1-10

The Beatitudes are amongst the most well-known words attributed to Jesus – from the Sermon on the Mount – as recorded in Matthew's Gospel:

When Jesus saw the crowds, he went up the mountain; and after he sat down, his disciples came to him. Then he began to speak, and taught them, saying:

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

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

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

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

Blessed are the merciful, for they will receive mercy.

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

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

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

Introduction: For me the Beatitudes encapsulate the essence of Jesus' teaching, offering an alternate view of human society where the values of the world are turned on their head. It's the poor, the vulnerable, those who mourn, who strive after justice - who are ultimately blessed – rather than the rich, strong, comfortable and self-satisfied.

The Beatitudes properly understood, read like a radical manifesto for life and you don't have to be a Christian for the words to resonate.

In this service I explore the Beatitudes drawing on several sources: Douglas Neil Klotz in his book 'Prayers of the Cosmos' draws out their deeper meanings by going back to the original language - Aramaic - the mother tongue that Jesus spoke. And Elizabeth West compares the Eight Beatitudes with the Eight-fold Path found in Buddhist tradition. Just as the Eightfold path offers a template for 'Right Living', so too the Beatitudes.

It's worth saying, the word 'blessed' can also be translated as 'happy' or fortunate. In Aramaic it conveys the sense of 'ripeness' – being in tune with divine reality.

So, let's explore each beatitude in turn, taking time to reflect and pause after each.

(You are invited to light a tea-light for each of the 8 beatitudes if you wish)

The first Beatitude: 'Blessed are the poor in spirit, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven'

'Poor in spirit' suggests 'humility' and receptivity. 'Spirit' translates as the breath which gives life. Rather than putting ourselves at the centre and claiming to have all the answers, we recognise our reliance on the Holy Breath, which sustains all things.

This seems very apt right now as we realise in the midst of this pandemic, despite our best human efforts, we cannot ultimately control life and death.

The phrase 'poor in spirit' is similar to the Buddhist idea of non-attachment; not seeking to possess anything as our own, recognising nothing exists in isolation; all of us are dependent on others and on the universe for our survival. We're finding that out more than ever, as we depend on the goodwill and hard work of all those who keep our health service functioning and our shops stocked.

In Luke's Gospel this beatitude reads simply: 'Blessed are you who are poor' – full-stop. In these challenging times let's not forget the added burden on those who are homeless and physically destitute.

'The kingdom of heaven' in Aramaic refers to the ruling principles that guide our lives towards unity - and embraces both masculine and feminine equally.

Let's pause for a few moments – on this first beatitude - letting go of our need to have all the answers and recognising our reliance on others and the Spirit that gives life... **PAUSE**

The second Beatitude: 'Blessed are those who mourn, for they will be comforted'

The word 'mourn' in Aramaic gives the sense of something dissolving, flowing with tears. It includes those who are weak from longing, confused, or in turmoil. The word 'comforted' suggests a sense of home-coming - united inside by love,

From a Buddhist perspective, the recognition that suffering - or Dukkha - is a universal fact of life and opening up to our pain and that of others, rather than walling it off, is the first step towards healing.

In this time of so much need – can you allow yourself to get in touch with difficult feelings of confusion, loss or turmoil? In this time of challenge, what do you most long for deeply?

For a few moments imagine yourself being comforted, united inside with Love - or perhaps hold someone else in need of comfort, within your heart. **PAUSE**

The third Beatitude: 'Blessed are the meek - for they shall inherit the earth'.

The Aramaic word for 'meek' translates as 'gentle'. The root meaning suggests one who has softened what is rigid or unnaturally hard - one who has surrendered.

Meekness is not passive acceptance or being a door mat. Jesus, the Buddha, Mahatma Gandhi - all embodied gentleness by living out the principle of non-violence or Ahimsa - but were men of strength, standing up for truth. Gentleness is the capacity to act without harming the rights or possessions of another, or ourselves.

Whilst the powerful grab the good things of earth through force, it is the gentle who will truly inherit the earth – because as we let go of grasping, we open ourselves to fully appreciate the world in all its transient beauty.

The word translated as ‘inherit’ suggests ‘receiving sustenance from the universal source of strength’. So, as we focus on our breathing for a few minutes, can we allow this source of strength – to soften the rigid places within us...loosening...opening to the bounty and beauty of creation? **PAUSE**

If you have access to a computer or smart phone you might like to listen to this piece of music composed by Vladimir Ivanovich Martynov – which featured in La Grande Bellezza (The Great Beauty), the winner of the 2014 Academy Award for Best Foreign Language Film. The film focusses on Jep Gambardella, a journalist with a passion for parties and beautiful women – who after his sixty-fifth birthday, finds himself lost between the nostalgia of the past and the uncertainty of the future. Jep realises he has lived superficially and so begins his search for great beauty, between the declining bourgeoisie and the stereotypes of society.

Kronos Quartet – the Beatitudes (*cut and paste this link into your browser*)

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Vrnp5wTb6w>

The fourth Beatitude

‘Blessed are those who hunger and thirst for righteousness for they shall be filled’

To modern ears ‘righteousness’ implies morality or correct behaviour. In Aramaic it refers to an inner and outer sense of justice – a sense of stability and rightness - a force-field for good amidst the competing voices that call to us.

To ‘Hunger’ suggests turning one’s mouth towards, to long for strengthening; ‘Thirst’ conveys an image of being parched inwardly or ‘burnt out.’ The Aramaic word for being filled - can mean ‘satisfied’, surrounded by fruit’ encircled by birthing’

When we feel burnt out at the seemingly insurmountable troubles in our world –especially now when so much is out of kilter - we are invited to rest in the hope that our strivings will bear fruit, if we stay true to that deeper source of goodness.

In Luke's Gospel this beatitude reads simply 'Blessed are you who hunger now - you shall be filled' – inviting us to remember the millions the world over who hunger for real food; closer to home too, thinking of the food shortages in supermarkets and food banks due to people buying more than they need.

For a few moments let's hold in our hearts all who at this moment physically hunger

And reflect on what we most hunger for in our own lives (whether that's healing or peace of mind, or a more equitable world). **PAUSE**

The 5th Beatitude: 'Blessed are the merciful, for they will receive mercy'

The root of the Aramaic words 'mercy' and 'merciful' mean womb. It also suggests pity, love, compassion - a long drawn breath - extending grace, or answer to prayer.

One possible translation of this beatitude is: Blessed are those who, from their inner wombs, birth mercy; they shall feel warm arms embrace them. To show mercy is related to forgiveness. Only as we forgive those who hurt us, can we truly receive forgiveness for the wrongs we do to others.

In a world where retaliation is often the natural law – an eye for an eye, a tooth for a tooth – we are called to embrace the qualities of mercy on a personal and global scale.

In a few moments of quiet I invite you to extend 'mercy' to all those in need of compassion and forgiveness today – including yourself. **PAUSE**

The 6th Beatitude: 'Blessed are the pure in heart – for they shall see God'

The phrase 'pure in heart' has little to do with moral behaviour but suggests singleness of heart - having a fixed purpose in the cause of love. It implies seeking after truth and wisdom above all else and not being swayed by competing demands. The word 'Heart' suggests a centre from which life radiates

The Aramaic word for 'God' – Alaha – means Sacred Unity, Oneness, the All, the Ultimate power.

One possible translation of this beatitude is: "Aligned with the One are those whose lives radiate from a core of love; they shall see God everywhere. "

In a few moments of silence allow this sacred name – A-la-ha – to unite with the rhythm of your breathing as you focus on your heart area ...

If you have access to a computer or smart phone you might like to listen to this piece of music:

Pure in heart – Patrick Hawes <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ek6yTMdvDF4>

The 7th Beatitude: *'Blessed are the peacemakers, for they will be called children of God'*

'Peacemakers' suggests images of planting: tilling the ground, labouring and bringing forth fruit – despite the odds. 'Shlama' - 'peace' - is the word used throughout the Middle East as a greeting: denoting health, safety, mutual agreement and happy assembly.

To be peace-makers in the world, we must start with ourselves. As Thich Nhat Hahn reminds us - we are called to 'Be peace.' This does not mean an absence of conflict, or peace at any price, but a state of mind in which we are no longer ruled by desire, bitterness, anger or fear. Rather we inhabit a 'calm state of abiding'

In a few moments of silence let's honour all those who work for peace, and radiate peace in places where there is conflict and suffering. And let's open ourselves to experiencing peace and calm abiding amidst the storms of our own lives. **PAUSE**

The 8th Beatitude

'Blessed are those who are persecuted for righteousness' sake, for theirs is the kingdom of Heaven

Too many people become martyrs for religious causes they believe in, thinking they will be rewarded in heaven. We need to discriminate between misguided zealots - and those who lay down their lives in the service of the greater good – Jesus - Ghandi - Martin Luther King – and NHS medics on the front line.

The Aramaic word 'persecuted' also suggests being dislocated, moved by scandal or shame – bringing to mind those who are imprisoned or exiled on false charges.

In this beatitude we see a realistic picture of what it means to be a disciple of the truth; those in power don't easily tolerate the prophetic spirit. But if you are exiled in the cause of justice, consider your new home to be the planet – the whole universe.

Let's remember all those who work for justice and for the greater good, even at risk to their lives – and pray they may be given the courage and strength to continue their work. PAUSE

Time of silence

At this point in the service those meeting online will be invited to share briefly our joys and concerns. You may like to have a time of silence thinking of your Meadow friends - as we will think also of you.

Alternative versions of the Beatitudes

There have been many reworkings of the beatitudes, including this modern version by Lutheran pastor and author Nadia Bolz-Weber (edited):

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

Blessed are the agnostics – those who doubt.

Blessed are those who aren't sure, who can still be surprised.

Blessed are they who are spiritually impoverished and therefore not so certain about everything that they no longer take in new information.

Blessed are those who have nothing to offer.

Blessed are they for whom nothing seems to be working.

Blessed are they who mourn, for they shall be comforted.

Blessed are they for whom death is not an abstraction.

Blessed are they who have buried their loved ones,
for whom tears are as real as an ocean.

Blessed are they who have loved enough to know what loss feels like.

Blessed are they who don't have the luxury of taking things for granted any more.

Blessed are the motherless, the alone, the ones from whom so much has been taken.

Blessed are the meek, for they shall inherit the earth.

Blessed are those who no one else notices,

The laundry guys at the hospital, and the night-shift street sweepers.

Blessed are the losers and the parts of ourselves that are so small.

Blessed are the forgotten, the unemployed, the unimpressive, the underrepresented.

Blessed are this who hunger and thirst for righteousness for they will be filled.

Blessed are the wrongly accused, the ones who never catch a break,

the ones for whom life is hard,

Blessed are those without documentation, the ones without lobbyists.

Blessed are foster kids and special ed kids and every other kid

who just wants to feel safe and loved and never does

Blessed are those who know there has to be more than this - because they are right.

Blessed are the merciful for they will receive mercy

Blessed are those who make terrible business decisions for the sake of people

Blessed are the burned-out social workers and the overworked teachers

Blessed are the kids who step between the bullies and the weak

Blessed are the ones who have received such real grace

that they are no longer in the position of ever deciding who are the deserving poor

Blessed is everyone who has ever forgiven me when I didn't deserve it

Time of reflection:

You might like to reflect for a few moments on which beatitudes most resonate with you at this time ... **Pause**

Here are some 'beatitudes' I've come up with based on the current crisis we're living through.

I invite you to read them slowly as a prayer:

Blessed are the NHS workers who work tirelessly to save lives, without inadequate resources;
May they find the strength and resilience they need.

Blessed are those heed the call to self-isolate, whatever the inconvenience;
May they find new ways of being alone.

Blessed are those who refuse to hoard and leave the last pack of loo roll for someone else!
May they find their generosity returned to them.

Blessed are those without the protection of a home;
May those on the streets and in shanty towns, not be forgotten.

Blessed are those who feel the fear, and still do what needs to be done;
May they find a courage they never knew they had.

Blessed are parents who grapple with the chaos of home-schooling;
May they be gifted with patience and humour!

Blessed are those who check on neighbours, run errands and collect prescriptions;
May they find the reward that comes from serving others.

Blessed are those who can still find reason to rejoice and savour the many gifts of life;
May their eyes and ears ever be open to wonder.

Blessed are you – YOU – whatever you are facing, however you are feeling ... whether anxious, uncertain, bored; if you feel under pressure, not up to the job; if you are alone and grieving the old ways of living, or opening up to new possibilities and ways of being; whether you are caring for others or being cared for...

Whatever you are facing as you keep your heart open to the joys and sorrows of the world, as you refuse to give in to despair, cynicism or indifference - may you know yourself blessed in these times....

A few moments now – praying for all those affected by the virus – Prince Charles, Prime minister Boris Johnson, the chief medical officer - Chris Whitty – and countless, nameless others - in this country and the world...

Let us bless each other and the world - and may we know that we are not alone – trusting in the love and goodness and beauty that upholds the world. Amen

Thank you for sharing this time with me. I invite you to sing or read aloud the following blessing for all in our Meadow Chapel family and all those you care about.

Sung Blessing: *(if you have a purple hymn book it's number 102)*

May the road rise with you,

May the wind be always at your back,

May the sun shine warm upon your face,

May the rain fall soft upon your fields

And until we meet again, may God hold you

In the hollow of his/her hand