

Blessed

A while ago, ABC Radio National ran a survey of unforgettable speeches across 5000 listeners.

The top ten are a diverse bunch...

Number 10 is Elizabeth the First's speech to troops as the Spanish Armada approached Britain in 1588 "I have the heart and stomach of a king" she said.

Number 9 is closer to home - Gough Whitlam's speech following his dismissal "Well may we say God save the Queen, because nothing will save the Governor General." (1975)

Number 8 is the St Crispin's Day speech before the Battle of Agincourt (1415) speech in Shakespeare's Henry V (1599) "We few, we happy few, we band of brothers"

Number 7 is Earl Spencer's Funeral Oration for Diana Princess of Wales (1997) "I stand before you today the representative of a family in grief, in a country in mourning before a world in shock."

Number 6 is John F. Kennedy's inaugural speech (1961), "Ask not what your country can do for you, ask what you can do for your country."

Number 5 is Abraham Lincoln's Gettysburg Address (1863) – "Four score and seven years ago"

Number 4 is Winston Churchill's "We shall fight them on the beaches" (1940)

Number 3 is Paul Keating's Redfern Address. It was delivered at Redfern oval in 1992, six months after the Mabo Decision. It marked the first time an Australian political leader had asked the white population to consider that they shared some of the responsibility for the problems experienced by the indigenous community.

Number 1 will be no surprise, and is Martin Luther King Junior's "I have a dream" speech (1963).

So that's nine of the top 10 unforgettable speeches.

The last one is interesting - number 2 is Jesus' Sermon on the mount, delivered more than 1400 years before the next oldest of the top 10. And we don't have any videos, nor recordings, nor even a manuscript. And it's the only one not delivered in English.

But what we do have is Matthew's written recollection of it. The beginning of Matthew, chapter 5, "Now when Jesus saw the crowds, he went up on a mountainside and sat down. His disciples came to him, and he began to teach them.

He said: "Blessed are the poor in spirit, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven." (5:1-3)

And so on.

They're some of the most well-known verses of the bible.

The sermon on the mount occurs soon after the beginning of Jesus' ministry – Matthew Chapter 4 tells us about Jesus' temptation in the wilderness, and then, as we heard last week, about the start of Jesus' mission "From that time on Jesus began to preach, "Repent, for the kingdom of heaven has come near." (4:17) and he called his first disciples.

And Jesus' ministry really took off: The last few verses of Matthew Chapter 4(23-) tell us that "Jesus went throughout Galilee, teaching in their synagogues, proclaiming the good news of the kingdom, and healing every disease and sickness among the people..."

Which brings us to the beginning of today's gospel reading "Now when Jesus saw the crowds, he went up on a mountainside and sat down. His disciples came to him, and he began to teach them."

There is some uncertainty as to exactly who Matthew is referring to here when he writes "his disciples" ... Does this mean those we know as the apostles, or to any or all of Jesus' followers? Did Jesus go up the mountainside as a practical way to address a large crowd of people, or did he go up the mountainside in an attempt to get away from the crowd so he could teach a smaller group in peace.

We don't know, but in any case, the disciples – and the crowd – were listening. The crowd were aware of the authority Jesus was speaking with – after all, if this fellow could heal every disease and sickness he must be worth listening to.

And as we consider how this sermon was delivered, we can think back to Moses going up Mount Sinai to receive the Ten Commandments – those commandments that describe how the people were to live as God's people. If they were God's people, we would have no other gods, if they were God's people, they would not murder, if they were God's people, they would honour their parents and so on.

Of course, those commandments are there for us, too. If we are God's people, then we need to respond by keeping God's commandments, too.

And here, in this sermon on the mountainside, Jesus tells how things will be for us if we are God's people – if we are Jesus' followers. And before he tells his disciples these things, he sits down – which might seem a trivial detail, but is also significant.

In our modern context, we generally stand up to teach – whether it's in school, university, in church or in some other context. If we've got important things to say – particularly to a group of people – we stand up to say them.

But in the first century context, you sat down to share the important stuff. Sitting down to teach was customary for rabbis. You might remember from John 19:13-16 that when Pilate condemned Jesus to be crucified, he sat down on the judge's seat to do so.

So there, on the mountainside, sitting down, Jesus began to teach them.

I understand that in the original Greek the form of the word 'teach' is in the imperfect tense, which means that Jesus' teaching didn't come to an end. The sermon on the mount may have finished, but Jesus' teaching didn't... In fact, Jesus never stopped teaching. He continued to teach – teach his disciples, teach the crowds, and – if we stop to think about it, teach us today.

Which brings us to the beginning of Jesus' sermon. The words that we – and so many others, even those far removed from church contexts know so well. The sermon on the Mount begins with the section we know as the Beatitudes. The word, "beatitude," comes from the Latin meaning blessed, and this section is about being blessed. Who is blessed? Well, Jesus tells us:

The poor in spirit... those who mourn... the meek... those who hunger and thirst for righteousness... the merciful... the pure in heart... the peacemakers... those who are persecuted because of righteousness... those who are insulted, persecuted and slandered. (5:3-11)

Now, the Sermon on the Mount is much longer than these verses, and the beatitudes – the blessings – are only 9 verses of the 99 verses over three chapters of the whole sermon – but I think these are the verses that people think of most.

And, if you think about some of the people who Jesus tells us will be blessed - people who are poor, mourning, hungry and thirsty, persecuted and insulted - you'd probably think that they were cursed, rather than blessed.

But the blessings that Jesus talks about, are to come. At the beginning of his ministry, Jesus called people to the kingdom of heaven and to repentance. He wanted them to turn away from the ways of the world and turn to the ways of God. In the opening passage of this sermon, Jesus tells us what it means to live for God, and how blessings will follow from that.

People aren't blessed because they mourn, but people who mourn are blessed because they will be comforted.

And so it is with those who hunger and thirst for righteousness, the hunger or thirst aren't the blessing, but blessing is that they will be filled.

Jesus goes on to say “Blessed are you when people insult you, persecute you and falsely say all kinds of evil against you because of me.” And he spells out when the blessing comes: “Rejoice in that day and leap for joy, because great is your reward in heaven. For that is how their ancestors treated the prophets.”

It’s a hard truth, but if we are followers of Jesus, then people will exclude us, revile us and defame us. Maybe not all the time, but sometimes. But the time is coming when we will receive our reward – we can be assured that what God has done for us in the life and death and resurrection of Jesus, cannot be undone.

Jesus tells us that just like the poor will receive the kingdom and the hungry will be filled and those who weep will laugh, so will, the people of God who are persecuted now, will be greatly rewarded.

We see this in the book of Psalms, too – the idea that blessings will flow to us from being followers of the Lord.

The Psalmist tells us in Psalm 1:1-2 “Blessed is the one who does not walk in step with the wicked or stand in the way that sinners take or sit in the company of mockers, but whose delight is in the law of the Lord, and who meditates on his law day and night.” And later in Psalm 119:1 “Blessed are those whose ways are blameless, who walk according to the law of the Lord.”

So while it may not seem that we are blessed, day to day or year to year, as we live as God wants us to live, we have this ongoing assurance of the blessings to come.

In the first three verses, Jesus tells us of three characteristics that will lead to blessings: poor in spirit, those who mourn, and the meek.

If we are poor in spirit, we recognise that we fall short of God’s glory, and that we will never be worthy of him through our own efforts. But Jesus tells us that the kingdom of heaven belongs to such people – we are not worthy, and yet we will be made worthy.

Those who mourn is not simply those mourning for lost loved ones, but those who mourn for suffering and sadness. Those who realise the needs of others and lament being able to satisfy them. Those who are filled with sadness when they see the ungodly actions of others.

But Jesus said that those who are mourning will be comforted.

And lastly, Jesus speaks of the meek. Those who are humble. Putting the needs of others before ourselves.

Thinking of ourselves less (and not falling into the trap of thinking less of ourselves).

Jesus tells us that the meek - those who may go without a lot of things in this life – will inherit the earth.

That blessing shows a great difference between the way of the world and the way of God, because meekness is never a way to acquire the worldly ‘blessings’ of wealth, prosperity and power.

It’s no different today: Rich people, politicians, celebrities, and many others besides, boast about how powerful they are, how intelligent they are, how loud they can be, and how talented they are, so that they can gain more power, more privilege, and more prestige.

That is not the way for the person pursuing the kingdom of God - instead, Jesus says, true blessing comes from meekness.

But there’s more to it than that, and verses 6-9 tell us of the need to hunger and thirst for righteousness, to be merciful, to have pure hearts and to be peacemakers.

We need to hunger and thirst for righteousness, people who follow Jesus must want to be righteous – to be good, to be holy, to desire things to be the way that it should be in God’s eyes.

Jesus also says, blessed are the merciful. There’s a really good reason to be merciful: God will show you mercy! As we pray in the Lord’s Prayer “Forgive us our sins, as we forgive those who sin against us”.

Modern people aren’t, generally, a forgiving lot. Forgiving is hard, and it is costly. But we always need to remember that the price of our own forgiveness was God giving up his son to die for us.

Also, Jesus says that the pure in heart will see God – and we know from the scriptures that none of us are inherently pure and righteous on our own, so we might wonder how are we to be pure in heart?

We are pure in heart by giving ourselves to Jesus, and having our hearts made new. To be metaphorically washed in the blood of the lamb (Rev 7:14), or as Isaiah says (1:18b) “Though your sins are like scarlet, they shall be as white as snow; though they are red as crimson, they shall be like wool.

Finally, we see that peacemakers shall be called children of God. The Russian invasion of Ukraine has brought the need for peacemaking to the forefront of our minds for the last year, but we know of so many other situations, large and small, where peace is needed. It’s not just wars. It’s not just international rivalries. But it’s the conflicts that plague our world, our communities and our own relationships.

We can make peace practically speaking by seeking to be humble, bringing about resolution when possible, and encouraging others to be people of peace. But the most important way, and perhaps the most often neglected one, is by pointing people to the Prince of Peace, Jesus.

Clearly, the things that Jesus encourages us toward, are different from the things of the world. There’s going to be a clash – and his followers are going to have a hard time... but despite the hard time, he says “Blessed are those who are persecuted because of righteousness...Blessed are you when people insult you, persecute you and falsely say all kinds of evil against you because of me.”

Can you imagine how odd this was for the original listeners to hear? Just picture everyone gathered on the side of the mountain listening to Jesus teach and He says, “You are blessed when you’re persecuted and insulted”

Up to this point in his gospel, Matthew hasn’t revealed Jesus having too many enemies, but Jesus is saying that they will face persecution because they follow him. Not simply because they do those things that are at odds with the world’s ways, but because they follow him.

You may be persecuted for following and obeying the Son of God.

You may suffer for being loving, holy, truthful, good, meek, righteous, and making peace.

Despite the persecution and insults, there will be blessing for Jesus’ followers – Jesus says “you will be considered like one of the prophets who are the great heroes of the faith” – and we heard those great lines from the prophet Micah (6:8) in our Old Testament reading this morning “And what does the Lord require of you? To act justly and to love mercy and to walk humbly with your God.”

In Jesus saying that blessings will flow despite the persecution and insults, he is saying that his way is better than the way of the world, and that his way will triumph over the world. If we follow Jesus, then we too will triumph. And he calls us to follow him – all the way through death to everlasting life.

Jesus said to his followers, and still says to us today “Rejoice and be glad, because great is your reward in heaven”

Amen