

God's Ways Are Not Our Ways

1 February 2026, 4th Sunday of the Epiphany: Reflection on Micah 6:1-8 and Matthew 5:1-12

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I'm sure nearly all of us are exposed to social media these days. To the constant bombardment of spammy images and pithy messages trying to get us to engage... mostly because of the complex system of ad revenue, but that is a topic better suited for a morning tea discussion than a sermon!

I'm guessing nearly all of you have, at some point, encountered Christian images on Facebook or some other platform. So this description might sound familiar to you.

There is a background, usually something nice and fairly inoffensive. Maybe a sunrise or a field or hands in prayer. Then, superimposed on that is an inspirational verse.

A particular favourite verse of many of the people who make these images is Jeremiah 29:11 'For I know the plans I have for you', declares the Lord, 'plans to prosper you and not to harm you, plans to give you hope and a future'.

It sounds very cosy, doesn't it? Like God is talking directly to you and offering you personal assurance that all will be well... except that's not what the verse means at all.

Chapter 29 of Jeremiah is the Prophet's letter to the Exiles in Babylon. Jeremiah himself never went into exile, the Babylonians quite liked him and he continued living in Judah before eventually relocating to Egypt. Jeremiah is specifically speaking to the exiles, promising that their exile isn't going to last forever. Their time of trial will come to an end. His message isn't aimed at 21st century readers hoping for a well paid job.

And while the Beatitudes that we heard a few minutes ago do not usually find their way into those little pictures on Facebook, they are verses that are often placed out of context, partly because we know them so well.

While I have seen the Beatitudes described as a 'profound, secular and humanist guide to living a meaningful life', the Beatitudes are not intended as a self-contained pocketbook that anyone can pull out as a guide to personal enlightenment. These are verses which are intricately tied to the wider story of Jesus, and God's story, narrated in the Bible as a whole. There are calls for ethical behaviour in this world, 'Blessed are merciful, the pure in heart, the peacemakers' but they are anchored as part of the greater story of God and humanity.

What I want to look at today is how the Beatitudes stand as a testament to the truth that God's ways are not the ways of our world.

So from the beginning...

'Blessed are the poor in spirit, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven'. Personally, I'd grown up having a little bit of uncertainty around this one. The poor... in spirit?

Is this a get-out-of-Jail-free card for those who hoard wealth? I'm not poor, but I am 'in spirit'.

I'd like to suggest that rather than thinking of 'poor in spirit' as 'having the spirit of poverty' it is more useful to think of it as 'those who live in the spirit'. Blessed are the poor who live in the spirit. Living in the spirit may lead to you lacking in earthly comforts.

Taken alongside the next three Beatitudes, 'blessed are those who mourn, the meek and those who hunger and thirst for righteousness' we see an acknowledgement that following God through Christ will at times be hard. This may lead to situations where we lack for things in life. Where we mourn. Where we hunger and thirst for a better, fairer world, but where that outcome seems impossibly far away. And yes, that better fairer, righteous world, will be one in which the hungry are fed and the thirsty can quench their thirst.

God's ways are not those of this world.

There will be times of sadness. We will face apathy and, perhaps, even persecution for what we advocate, but we live with the promise that we are working for and towards God's coming reign of justice and love.

The latter four Beatitudes, give us some idea of what God is calling us to do, how God is calling us to behave, that might set us at odds with society. We are given a glimpse of the ways of God that are so unlike those of the world.

'Blessed are the merciful'. Hollywood and other media is full of fantastical stories of vengeance masquerading as justice. We feel good when we emerge dominant over those who have set themselves against us, when our team wins and the other team loses.

But God's ways are not those of this world. We are called to turn away from that kind of thinking and to be merciful instead.

'Blessed are the pure in heart'. Not just those who say the right thing, but those who truly believe it and are ready to act on it, regardless of personal cost.

‘Blessed are the peacemakers’. Again, not blessed are the dominant or the triumphant. Not Blessed are the ones who win, but rather Blessed are those who work to stop the suffering of all people, even those who, for a moment in time, might seem like enemies.

‘Blessed are you when people revile you and persecute you and utter all kinds of evil against you falsely, on my account’. God is calling on us to do what we can to bring God’s idea of justice into the world, to speak that truth into places where systems of domination and oppression continue to exist and, God knows, this will not make us popular.

As I alluded to at the beginning of the sermon, Jesus’s message sits within a wider context. It is part of a larger story that spans the whole of the Bible.

Some 750 years earlier, give-or-take, the prophet Micah also spoke of what God required of his people, ‘Will the Lord be pleased with thousands of rams, with ten thousands of rivers of oil? ‘He asked. ‘Shall I give my firstborn for my transgression, the fruit of my body for the sin of my soul?’

These are the things that would have been required by other Gods. Some great display of sacrifice in order to please the deity. Very similar, it so happens to the kinds of gifts that might have impressed an earthly King of Micah’s time... or, let’s be honest, many of the world leaders we still have today.

But that is not what our God wants. Rather, Micah tells us ‘what does the Lord require of you but to do justice and to love kindness and to walk humbly with your God?’

God’s ways are not the ways of this world.

And as I leave you to reflect on that, I would also invite you to consider what I said earlier about systems of domination and oppression. What can we do as individuals, or as a community to bring God’s way into this world. Do we hunger and thirst for righteousness? Are we merciful? Where can we be peacemakers?