

What Kind Of People Are We

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Date: 04 January 1981

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[0 : 00] Glory to you, O Lord. And it came to pass, as the angels were gone away from them into heaven, the shepherds said one to another, Let us now go even unto Bethlehem and see this thing which is come to pass, which the Lord has made known unto us.

And they came with haste and found Mary and Joseph and the babe lying in a manger. And when they had seen it, they made known abroad the saying which was told them concerning this child.

And all they that heard it wondered at those things which were told them by the shepherds. Mary kept all these things and pondered them in her heart.

And the shepherds returned glorifying and praising God for all the things that they had heard and seen as it was told unto them. And when eight days were accomplished for the circumcising of the child, his name was called Jesus, which was so named of the angel before he was conceived in the womb.

The confession of our faith in the words of the Nicene Creed.

[1 : 22] I believe, I believe, the Father Almighty, maker of heaven and earth, and of all things visible and invisible, and in one Lord Jesus Christ, the only begotten Son of God, begotten of the Father before all worlds, God of God, light of life, very God of very God, begotten not made, being of one substance with the Father, through whom all things were made, who for us men and for our salvation came down from heaven, and was incarnate by the Holy Ghost of the Virgin Mary, and was made man, and was crucified also for us under Pontius Pilate.

He suffered and was buried, and the third day he rose again, according to the scriptures, and ascended into heaven, and sitteth on the right hand of the Father, and he shall come again with glory to judge both the quick and the dead, whose kingdom shall have no end.

And I believe in the Holy Ghost, the Lord, the giver of life, who proceeded from the Father and the Son, who with the Father and the Son together is worshipped and glorified, who spake by the prophets.

And I believe one holy, Catholic, and apostolic Church. I acknowledge one baptism for the remission of sins, and I look for the resurrection of the dead, and the life of the world to come.

Amen. Our God, open our hearts to thy word, and thy word to our hearts, for Christ's sake. Amen. I want you to turn to page four in the New Testament section of the Pew Bible, so that you have before you this fifth chapter of Matthew, and that section of it known familiarly to us as the attitudes of being, that is, the Beatitudes, and the first one particularly I want to read to you, which says, Blessed are the poor in spirit, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven.

[3 : 51] It is not for me as a minister an unfamiliar thing to be confronted with somebody whom I may see fit to question about the nature of their faith.

And very often they regard that really as a question about the nature of their general behavior. And they give me the quiet assurance that through the whole of their lives they have, by and large, obeyed the Ten Commandments, which, by and large, is considered impossible in the Bible, but quite possible within the realm of some people's understanding of life.

Now, in the New Testament, the concept for the Christian is that what would be reflected in your life is not a steadfast obedience of the Ten Commandments, but the persistence of those qualities of life which are described in the Beatitudes.

And I don't think that even in the same way they are given to us to encourage us to strive to be poor in spirit, but they come to us and should find us in that condition and should help us to understand the condition that we are in, that is, poverty of spirit.

So as we face life and we read this, it would be a happy thing if you found, yes, that's what describes my situation, poverty of spirit.

[5 : 35] Now, on this first Sunday of the New Year, and this our parish communion, I'd like to ask the question, what kind of people are we and who is the God that we serve?

And to answer that question largely in terms of the Beatitudes. Because we are undoubtedly a proud and prosperous people, justifiably proud and undeniably prosperous.

But then, what are the other marks that distinguish us? And that distinguish us as a congregation? Because every congregation likes to think of itself as somewhat peculiar, and our congregation is peculiar in certain ways.

And can I tell you that in the ministry which I have among you, the kind of thing that I run up against time and time again looks like this.

I was made to go to church when I was young. And so I don't much like it now. I was made to sing in the choir.

[6 : 49] I was made to be confirmed. I was sent to a church school and made to attend chapel every day. Confirmation was completely meaningless to me at the time.

Our family were offended by the minister and something that he did. We don't talk about it now, but we haven't been to church very much since it happened. I've always contributed to the church even though I don't attend.

Or, we went to church when our children were young. And that kind of thing goes on. And it's a sad admission somewhat in contrast to blessed are the poor in spirit and blessed are the meek and blessed are those that are mourning and so on.

It's a different kind of thing. So that as this year begins, I want to say to you that one of the things that troubles me most is that in my capacity as the rector of St. John's, I am bearing the sins of several generations of rectors of St. John's.

That is, it's passed on from one generation to another. I don't mean by that that I haven't added to that list of things for which I need to be forgiven.

[8 : 16] But one of the really happy things for me at the beginning of this new year would be to know of your forgiveness of the sins of the rectors of St. John's, myself included, and probably particularly myself because the others may not worry about it as much at this point.

May I be forgiven for the calls that I haven't made and may I be forgiven for the hurts and indignities that I've caused to people.

And may I be forgiven for the sermons that were too long and for the insensitivity to people in leading worship or administering the sacrament. I know of one rector of this parish that wore odd socks.

I haven't had that trouble as far as I know, but I have trouble keeping my shoes shined and that's not always forgiven. Can I or we be forgiven for the fact that we're always asking for money?

People seem to anticipate this and even when you don't say it, some people hear you saying it. And so, there needs to be forgiveness. Can I be forgiven for the pattern of prejudice that I establish when I visit one house too often and another house not at all?

[9 : 45] such forgiveness really carried out would lift a tremendous burden off my shoulders in just the everyday ministry in this parish to know that kind of real forgiveness from people, to know that I didn't have to bear the sins of several generations of rectors on my shoulders as I seek to do the job I have in this parish.

That would be for me a tremendous burden lifted and for us as a congregation it might show some of the hard reality of something that needs to be done and something that must involve people in what is called the Beatitudes.

because as I look at this year ahead and anticipate that God will bless us very greatly as a congregation then you say well now how will God bless us and through whom will he bless us as a congregation and the answer is that he will bless us through the poor in spirit.

The poor in spirit are those to whom the kingdom of God is given. Blessed are the poor in spirit for theirs is the kingdom of God.

And what that means is that the kingdom of God is given to you by preaching. And so the congregation that is poor in spirit is happy to hear the preaching of the good news of the gospel of Jesus Christ.

[11 : 38] that's how their poverty of spirit is met and they are encouraged. And those who mourn are comforted and the special ministry of God the Holy Spirit in the fellowship of his church is to comfort people to make them strong by that ministry of the Holy Spirit.

and blessed are the meek for they shall inherit the earth. And all of us who are engaged in as we inevitably are in our aggressive society engaged in private enterprise power merchants that we are seeking to get hold of the power that's available.

that's not what it means to be meek. To be meek recognizes that the earth is a gift from God and it's not given as the reward for those who do well in the power struggle.

it's given to those who don't become involved in the power struggle at all. That can be demonstrated over and over again in world history.

That the meek shall inherit the earth. So do you see what's happening to a congregation? The gospel is being preached, the Holy Spirit is comforting, the earth is being given, and in the fourth instance it's blessed are those who hunger and thirst after righteousness.

[13 : 17] Which doesn't mean that you measure yourself against the Ten Commandments to see how well you've done. It means that in fact you are hungry for a righteousness which belongs to you as again something that God has done for you in Christ and of which this sacrament of the Holy Communion is the visible partaking of that righteousness which is ours through faith in Christ.

And to hunger and thirst after that righteousness is a source of blessing. And blessed are the pure in heart, for they live with uncluttered priorities.

They see God. They see the point of it all. And how many of us caught in the maelstrom of all our conflicting priorities say to ourselves in desperation, I don't really see what this is all about.

That's why the blessing comes to those who are pure in heart of seeing God. And blessed are the merciful, which simply means the people who with great pity and loving kindness act positively towards the unfortunate.

Most of us are aware that the unfortunate are so many in number that to expose yourself to their needs would simply be to court disaster.

[15 : 00] And so we carefully guard ourselves from those who need our mercy because our resources are so limited. And so the word is, blessed are the merciful, for they shall obtain mercy.

And after you've spent a good deal of your life guarding yourself against the claims that people have on you by their unfortunate circumstances, you yourself are no longer in the position to receive that mercy which you in your wisdom saw fit not to give.

And so that God could work in us to be deeply concerned for the unfortunate people of the world is something which we very much need.

And blessed are the peacemakers. And they're blessed because they have an ingredient to bring to our warmongering world which we don't have anywhere else.

I told you about the old member of this congregation at Christmas communion saying, after I'd said the peace which passes all understanding, he said, yes, that's what it's all about.

[16 : 16] And can we bring that peace to the counseling we do? Can we bring that to the fellowships we are in? Can we bring that to our homes and our family?

family? One of the embarrassments of life nowadays is that in that wonderful magazine called Driftwood, which is really circulated among an exclusive group of people who habituate the Gulf Islands, which in the minds of many are just short of paradise itself.

There are large advertisements in the Driftwood telling you how to get a divorce for \$100. Now, presumably people that have arrived at that happy human estate of being in the Gulf Islands wouldn't consider such a thing.

But nevertheless, there it is. And people are selling divorce quite quickly because nobody knows how to make peace in areas where it's broken down, between husbands and wives.

And nobody knows how to make peace in so many of the conflicts so that much of the business that we generate is not the business of the peacemakers, but the business of those who have to pick up the pieces after we have destroyed each other.

[17 : 42] So that those who can come to the various situations of our world as peacemakers are a source of blessing. And then, blessed are the persecuted.

Now, it doesn't mean that you're persecuted for being stupid, and it doesn't mean that you're persecuted for being ignorant, and it doesn't mean that you're persecuted for all sorts of reasons for which persecution is perhaps undeniably necessary.

me. But it's blessed are those who are persecuted for righteousness' sake. And that means simply that if you are prepared to confess your faith in Jesus Christ, if you are prepared to identify yourself in the world as a Christian, then in gentle and sophisticated ways, even in our enlightened society, you will undoubtedly be persecuted.

Persecuted for your folly, persecuted for the threat you represent to other people, persecuted for your hypocrisy, persecuted for your pomposity in thinking that you ever knew any better than anybody else.

But it's an experience of how life works. that if you make any kind of solid commitment to be a soldier and servant of Jesus Christ in the society in which we live, it's going to cost you something.

[19 : 20] That cost is described here as persecution. Sometimes it gets bitter and bloody. In our society it's just hurtful and sophisticated.

So those are the means by which blessing is going to come to our church. Blessing is going to come to our congregation. These are the aristocracy of our church.

These are the important people, the poor in spirit, and the mourners, and the meek, and those who hunger and thirst after righteousness, and the merciful, and the peacemakers, and the persecuted.

they are the means by which God blesses us as a congregation. These are the people through whom the kingdom comes to us, through whom the Holy Spirit's activity comes to us, through whom the righteousness which is in Christ comes to us, through which all the material prosperity of this world comes to us.

These are the people through whom God blesses us, and gives us the assurance of his good purpose among us.

[20 : 46] When our communion service draws to a close this morning, the assurance which we claim from God in one of the final prayers of the communion service reads like this, that God graciously feeds us and assures us through these elements of bread and wine, that we are living members of his mystical body, which is the blessed company of all faithful people, and are also heirs through hope of his everlasting kingdom.

So that in that prayer, we are claiming all the promises that God makes to us in the beatitude. We are claiming membership in the kingdom, the comfort of the Holy Spirit, the power which belongs to the meek, the righteousness which belongs to those who hunger and thirst after a righteousness outside their own fabrication of their own righteousness.

It's the blessing which comes to the pure in heart, to the merciful, the peacemakers, and the persecuted. And this is the blessing that we claim for ourselves as a congregation as we partake together of this Lord's suffering.

The reason that we claim it is because we know that it is God's good purpose of love towards us. As we on this parish communion Sunday, the first of the year, think of what kind of people we are and what kind of people God is making us into, then we begin to see the light shining in the darkness and the purpose of God in Jesus Christ being effected in our lives individually and as a congregation.

Stand and sing the offertory hymn number 237. hoi h h Thank you.

[23 : 56] Thank you.

Thank you. Thank you.

Thank you. Thank you.

Thank you. Thank you.