

## SERMON 10.2.08

**Bible Reading:** Matthew 5: 1-12

*Note: The early part of the worship service contained a focus on the Apology to the Stolen Generations, which was to be delivered by the Prime Minister, Mr. Rudd, on the following Wednesday 13<sup>th</sup> Feb. 2008.*

When we come together in corporate worship, it is important to acknowledge what is happening in the world and in our nation. Next Wednesday, the first day of the new parliament, Prime Minister Kevin Rudd will deliver an apology to the Stolen Generation. This refers to the aboriginal children who were taken from their parents, families and communities, sometimes willingly, sometimes forcibly, and brought up in institutions, homes or with families, because it was felt that they would have a better chance of a good life away from aboriginal culture. Some ten years ago, the Bringing Them Home report recommended that the Australian government make a formal apology to all those affected by the policy of separation from their birth parents.

There have been debates about whether the apology should be given or not. There is no doubt that many aboriginal children benefited from the education and care they received. Many of them acknowledge that. Today is not a time for debate about it, but a time for prayer and thoughtful reflection about standing as a church in solidarity with indigenous people, the first inhabitants of this land, saying that we are sorry for the injustice that has been done, even if we today are not responsible. To say sorry is the first step towards reconciliation. It is the first step towards collective healing for all Australians. With hope, prayer and work, it may be the first step towards closing the appalling gap in life expectancy, infant mortality, child sexual abuse, drug and alcohol addiction, and education between Aborigines and white Australians.

The churches of Victoria issued an apology to indigenous people some 8 years ago in an Ecumenical Service held at St. Patrick's Cathedral in July 2000. The then President of the Conference of Churches of Christ in Victoria and Tasmania signed a statement headed 'The Common Statement of Commitment', which stated:

'Acknowledging the injustices that have characterised the history of this country since 1788, and re-affirming our apology to Indigenous people for our short-comings and past mistakes, the faith communities of Australia make the following promise.

We will do all we can to secure a fair go for indigenous Australians.

We will act to put right continuing injustices.

We will work together to heal our nation's hurts.

Inspired by our spiritual heritage, we pledge ourselves to work for the vision of a united Australia that respects this land of ours, and values the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander heritage, and provides justice and equity for all.'

This statement echoes the strong theme through scripture of God's justice. 'Blessed are they who maintain justice, who constantly do what is right.' *Psalm 106: 3*

'Yet the Lord longs to be gracious to you; he rises to show you compassion. For the Lord is a God of justice. Blessed are all who wait for him.' *Isaiah 30: 18*

‘Let justice roll on like a river, righteousness like a never-failing stream!’ *Amos 5: 24*

This morning, we affirm in our words, in our thoughts and in our prayers, the step that the Prime Minister is taking in making the apology to the Stolen Generations. We pray, using a prayer from the National Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Ecumenical Commission:

### **Prayer for the Journey of Healing**

Almighty and loving God, you who created ALL people in your image, lead us to seek your compassion as we listen to the stories of our past. You gave your only Son, Jesus, who died and rose again so that sins will be forgiven. We place before you the pain and anguish of dispossession of land, language, tradition, culture and family kinship that Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples have experienced. We live in faith that all people will rise from the depths of despair and hopelessness. Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander families have endured the pain and loss of loved ones, through the separation of children from their families. We are sorry and ask Your forgiveness. Touch the hearts of the broken, homeless and inflicted and heal their spirits. In your mercy and compassion walk with us as we continue our journey of healing to create a future that is just and equitable.

We ask that the Members of Parliament when they come together on Wednesday will be responsive to the call for justice for all people who live in Australia. When the apology is given, may it be a step towards healing and reconciliation. Lord, you are our hope. Amen.

### **Introduction to Bible Reading**

Today we commence a series on the sayings and teachings of Jesus, as they are found in what is called ‘the Sermon on the Mount’. To live as followers of Jesus, it is vitally important that we know what Jesus taught, because the theme of his teaching was about life in the Kingdom of God. The teaching is still relevant today. It is a guide for us about what being a Christian, a follower of Jesus Christ, means. Jesus had a stern warning for those who hear his words but do not allow the words to change their way of life. If we ignore Jesus’ teachings we will not be able to withstand the storms of life. If we want our lives to hold up under pressure, our only choice is to build on the rock of God’s truth revealed in Christ.

If you want to know how best to live – if you want to know how to deal with stress – if you want to make the choices that are life-giving and health-giving – then listen to Jesus.

### **Sermon**

It was Gandhi, the political and spiritual leader of India, who said that the Sermon on the Mount was the greatest message he had ever heard. A Hindu, Gandhi admired Jesus and often quoted from the Sermon on the Mount. Once when the missionary E. Stanley Jones met with Gandhi he asked him, "Mr. Gandhi, though you quote the words of Christ often, why is that you reject becoming his follower?" Gandhi replied, "I don't

reject your Christ. I love your Christ. It's just that so many of you Christians are so unlike your Christ."

Ghandi's rejection of Christianity grew out of an incident that happened when he was a young man practising law in South Africa. He had become attracted to the Christian faith, had studied the Bible and the teachings of Jesus, and was seriously exploring becoming a Christian. He decided to attend a church service. As he came up the steps of the church where he intended to go, a white South African elder of the church prevented him from entering.

"Where do you think you're going?" the man asked Ghandi. Ghandi replied, "I'd like to attend worship here." The church elder snarled at him, "There's no room for people like you in this church. Get out of here or I'll have my assistants throw you down the steps."

From that moment, Ghandi said, he decided to adopt what good he found in Christianity, but would never again consider becoming a Christian if it meant being part of the church. He said that everyone knows what the Sermon on the Mount means - except Christians.

We come to the list of the Beatitudes – about those who are blessed. Who are the blessed? It is difficult to know how to translate the Greek word, ‘makarios’. Beatitudes are not just about emotions. They are not just a list of attitudes that will bring happiness, nor are they simply personal qualities. They are primarily God’s favour for certain human actions and situations. They describe the kind of people who Jesus says are part of the kingdom of God. If you want to know what kind of people live in the kingdom of God, then look at the beatitudes. They give a picture of what the world would look like if the Lord’s Prayer is fulfilled – ‘Your kingdom come. Your will be done on earth as it is in heaven.’

Just before the Sermon on the Mount, Jesus has said, "... the kingdom of heaven has come near" (Matt 4:17). The beatitudes start to describe what the reign of God will look like as God's will is done on earth as it is in heaven, a possibility that is about to happen..

‘How honoured are the poor in spirit ...’ When we think of those who are honoured by the world, think of the Australia Day Honours list or the Queen’s Birthday Honours list. They are generally people who have made a name for themselves in work, or sport, or community activity, or military service, or the public service. But the ones who are honoured by Jesus in the Beatitudes are quite the opposite. A. W Tozer in his book *The Pursuit of God*, writes: "A fairly accurate description of the human race might be furnished, by taking the beatitudes, turning them wrong side out, and saying, 'Here is your human race.'" Jesus gives a picture of what is valued in the Kingdom of God.

**‘Blessed are the poor in spirit, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven.’** *Matthew 5: 3.* The poor in spirit are the poor - the dispossessed and abandoned ones – those who are desperate and needy. They have little wealth, and therefore are dependent on God and others. They know they are needy. Jesus says there is a place for them in the kingdom of heaven, despite the fact that they feel they have no legitimate place in the world. When I hear that, I think today of the homeless, the destitute, the children with not enough food or resources for a good education.

**‘Blessed are those who mourn, for they will be comforted.’** *Matt. 5: 4* those who mourn know grief, life’s hard and bitter experiences. They have no reason for joy. Instead of a private, personal grief, they may mourn for the condition of the world.

**‘Blessed are the meek, for they will inherit the earth.’** *Matt. 5: 5* Meekness is not weakness. It shows itself in humility and quiet inner strength. Those who are slow to anger, and gentle with others. It’s not being easily pushed over by others, but having controlled strength. It is the opposite of the self-centred attempt to be independent of God. Why do they inherit the earth? Because they don’t push themselves forward to demand what is theirs by right.

**‘Blessed are those who hunger and thirst for righteousness, for they will be filled.’** *Matt. 5: 6* Those who are passionate about having right relationships with God and with others more than anything else. Those who want God’s way of life, God’s love, God’s ways of truth, justice and righteousness, above everything else. They long to live according to God’s ways, and desire justice for all.

**‘Blessed are the merciful, for they will receive mercy.’** *Matt. 5: 7* The kind and compassionate. People who put right what has gone wrong. They are quick to relieve the suffering and respond to the need of others. The opposite of mercy is judgment and a judging, fault-finding heart. Consistently, God is forgiving and merciful to human beings, and we are asked to be the same to others.

**‘Blessed are the pure in heart, for they will see God.’** *Matt. 5: 8* Those who will see God are those in whom something of God has been seen, because of their integrity, their single-minded passion and devotion to God. ‘Teach me your way, O Lord, that I may walk in your truth; give me an undivided heart to revere your name. I give thanks to you, O Lord my God, with my whole heart, and I will glorify your name forever.’ *Psalms 86: 11-12* An undivided heart is a beautiful description of a heart that is centred on God.

**‘Blessed are the peacemakers, for they will be called children of God.’** *Matt. 5: 9* People who are passionate about facilitating peace. A peacemaker normally gets drawn into places of conflict e.g. within families, churches, schools, work, cities, nations. In these conflicting and often hostile situations, a peacemaker works for God’s peace that is based on justice, fairness and righteousness. Those who are actively establishing shalom – the wholeness, well-being, peace and reconciliation that God wills for a broken world.

**‘Blessed are those who are persecuted for righteousness’ sake, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven.’** *Matt. 5: 10* The first Christians experienced enormous physical persecutions initially from their Jewish families, Jewish friends and Jewish synagogue leaders and then from the Roman government and its representatives. Throughout the history of the church, there have always been persecutions, ridicule and martyrdom for following the ways of Christ. We don’t experience persecution in Australia for our beliefs, but there is a cost at times in standing for what is right and true and godly. We can be ridiculed and misunderstood. But still we are called to be faithful.

What does this teaching mean for us in our daily living? How do we cultivate the ways of living in the Kingdom that Jesus speaks about in the Beatitudes? Which beatitudes seem to be in short supply in our nation? Community? Our own life? It becomes a matter of prayer, daily taking in the teaching of Jesus, and actively living a life that mirrors the kind of life that Jesus lived.

What does the church learn from the Beatitudes? “Disadvantaged” people, as our culture calls them, had a special place in Jesus’ heart. It is fairly easy to see the blessedness of peacemakers, mercy givers, and justice seekers. We admire them, as we do Mother Teresa, for instance. But the poor? And those who grieve? And how about the ones that people insult and persecute and accuse falsely? Should these people count themselves happy and blest because they are disadvantaged?

I think Jesus would say, look around you, your neighbourhood, your community, look around your church – make sure you make a place for those whom I honour. Make them feel welcome. Offer them hospitality. Let them know you will give them mercy. And that alongside you, they are also my children. We must never say or give the impression that there's no room for people like you in this church, especially when we claim to be a church anyone can come to.

This is a call and a challenge to the church – as we have been blessed, we are to give away the blessings of God.

Jesus,  
count us among those  
who desire to be  
poor in  
spirit,  
to be peacemakers.

To hunger and thirst for justice.  
To be meek and merciful.

Let us become  
beatitudes  
for each  
other.

Resources:

<http://www.sermonsfromseattle.com/>

<http://www.liturgy.slu.edu/>

<http://www.montreal.anglican.org/>

<http://www.australianchristian.org.au>

<http://www.ncca.org.au/natsiec/resources/prayers>