

MATTHEW 5:1-16
BEING DIFFERENT!

Do you have a role model? Is there someone who, when you look at them, you think “I wish I was like...”? It might be someone at work, someone who does your job in the way you aspire to do it; it might be a teacher you have or had at school who inspired you to learn and made you want to be like them; it might be a family member who had all kinds of good qualities in life and you just wanted to have these good qualities too; it might be a friend; it might be all kinds of people. This works at all sorts of levels: *Hello* and *OK* magazines have so much to answer for: they show photos of a celebrity wedding like the Beckhams or some such and the fans just want to copy them; so they want their wedding to have the same kinds of things. The fashion industry is all about role models, people who want to wear the same stuff as they've seen on the catwalk; that can become dangerous and controversial as some young women try to lose weight to be the same size as the models. Children want to be like their heroes, footballers, rugby players, singers, TV personalities; they want the same kind of fame and stardom, but so often the reality of life is quite different, the bubble gets burst.

Having a role model is ultimately all about values. We see someone behave in a particular way and are attracted! We like the values that they demonstrate and so we want to share that set of values. As a teenager, it was the lifestyle and values of an older Christian that attracted me to the Christian faith at a time when I could easily have wandered off completely because Church was boring! We all have a set of values by which we live. We may not always be able to articulate these values, but we all have them. As we said last week, we are influenced by so many different forces and our values are shaped in so many different ways.

The Sermon on the Mount is all about values, Jesus' values, and they can be very different from anything that we're used to! John Stott, said about the whole Sermon: “It describes what human life and human community look like when they come under the gracious rule of God.” He then goes on to describe a “Christian counter-culture... a Christian value system” that is often very different from the ways and the values of the world in which we live. When Jesus is Lord, things are very different; when we live our lives according to the values Jesus teaches, life is very different. The whole of Matthew chapters 5-7, the piece we call the Sermon on the Mount, is about this set of values: values that shape our religious life, that shape our attitude to one another and other people, that shape the way we think about money and possessions, values that shape our ambitions and our life-style. We dip into the opening part of that today. Jesus turns our values upside-down. I was once part of a discussion group when I was a student and one of my fellow=students described the Sermon on the Mount as the most comforting part of the Bible; I disagree: I find it one of the most challenging, questioning and even disturbing parts of the Bible to read.

The Beatitudes are one of these pieces of the Bible that I remember having to learn by heart as a child in Sunday School. Along with the books of Bible, and the ten commandments, the beatitudes is one of these pieces. But much more than that, these eight sayings offer us a radical pattern for life. They take us right to the very root of what makes us the kind of people that we are and they challenge the system of values by which we live our lives. These eight sayings are not eight separate groups of people (some who are poor in spirit, others who are meek); these eight sayings are eight qualities of one group of people, the disciples of Jesus. This is Jesus' description of what

the Christian should be, of the kind of qualities that His followers should have, the ways by which Christians should live our lives. Take the whole picture; this is our role model for Christian living; this is the kind of people we should be and aspire to become.

Each of the eight sayings begins in same way: "*Blessed are...*" Some Bible version translate this as "Happy", but that is not enough. Happiness suggests an emotional state, as if the people who do these things will be happy because of what they are and do; happiness so often depends on our circumstances and what happens to us. That is not what Jesus means, it seems to me. "Blessed" carries with it more of the idea of congratulation than a state of happiness; this is about what God thinks of us; those who have these qualities are to be congratulated because we have these qualities. It is fascinating to see who are the people that God blesses, in contrast with the people that the world holds up and honours!

"*Blessed are...*" (5:3) The personal development books encourage us to be self-sufficient; we need to look inside ourselves for resources of strength and reserves of power; let's not depend on anyone else; be your own person and be proud! "Poor in spirit", on the other hand, acknowledges that we have nothing, nothing with which to buy God's favour and a way to heaven, but that we need to humbly trust in and depend on God for all that we are. The world says that the blessed people are rich, famous, celebrities who have everything and their lifestyle is to be admired and imitated; these are the beautiful people. Jesus' way is very different. The "poor in spirit" are the people whom God blesses; the poor in spirit are the people to whom belongs the kingdom of heaven; complete salvation is theirs, a gift from God, a promise from God.

That list goes on: those who mourn, who have the sorrow of repentance in their hearts and mourn the loss of innocence and weep over evil in the world. The meek, humble people, gentle, with a realistic view of ourselves. Those who hunger and thirst for what is right in every sense of that word, who have a sense of right and wrong. Those who are merciful, forgiving those who have wronged them. Those who are pure in heart, the centre of their being is given to serve God wholeheartedly. The peacemakers, those who seek to reconcile and heal, living at peace with other people as far as we are able. Those who are persecuted for their faith, standing up for what they believe in and for their values, at a cost. These are the values that Jesus commends, even teaches; these are the values of what human life is like when Jesus is Lord; the kind of people that we should aspire to become, and already a work in progress. These are people that God blesses; these are the qualities for which God will congratulate us; the world is turned on its head here, Jesus' radical picture, challenging the accepted norms. We need to be clear in our own mind about what matters to us.

For each one of these we could paint another picture, a contrasting picture, a contrasting set of values. The world in which we live so often admires and applauds almost the opposite. We have reservations about it at times, but we do admire powerful and strong people, the rich, people who have power and influence over others. The world so often tramples over people who are poor and meekness is so often seen as weakness. We hunger and thirst for promotion, wealth, and possessions and often give the impression that we don't care about what is right and wrong as long as it feels good and makes us happy. Those who forgive are seen as weak and as people capable of being exploited by the unscrupulous. People who have a wholehearted devotion to God are so often laughed at and even in our, so-called, tolerant culture today Christians are persecuted for their faith because other, more powerful forces, take advantage.

It would be so easy for us simply to merge into the background, for Christians to take on board the value system of the world around us, of others in the community and just go along with it. It would be so easy just to adopt the lifestyle and values of “everybody else” because it is hard to be different; it is hard to stand out from the crowd. Yet, Jesus calls us to be distinctive; there is this Christian counter-culture that has a very different set of values and Jesus calls us to live this counter-cultural way. Perhaps you know the maxim of Edmund Burke: “All that is necessary for evil to prosper is for good people to do nothing.” Let me change it a little: all that is necessary for the culture to become completely secular and godless is for Christians to do nothing. Hiding our head in the sand won’t work; trying to be the same as everyone else won’t work; something valuable and important will be lost.

The irony is, according to Jesus and living by His values, we will become role models for others and we will have an impact on our culture and society, a hidden but priceless impact and influence. He gives us two pictures: “*You are...*” (5:13) “*You are...*” (5:14) Salt was used in Jesus’ time as a way of preserving things; salt was rubbed into meat to keep it from going bad. It seems that Jesus suggests that His disciples have an influence on the world that stops it from becoming completely corrupt, that by our influence good will still prevail. We need to live with Jesus values in our hearts. Light breaks the darkness; even the smallest candle breaks the most intense darkness and light will shine. It is so easy for us to hide our light under a pail, to keep our faith hidden: we say nothing, we do nothing, we put into practice nothing of what Jesus teaches. Yet, Jesus calls us to reflect to the world something of His love, His attitudes, His values and we do that by the kind of people that we are, by the things we say and the way we say them, by the good that we do in the world. So we become role models for the world, showing the world what Jesus is like, attracting others to Jesus.

The whole of the Sermon on the Mount carries on this theme: “What human life and human community look like when Jesus is Lord.” Read the rest of it; go back over the Beatitudes. See for yourself what Jesus says in some of the most famous words in the whole of the Bible. See how much Jesus gets right to root of life; see how He challenges what we consider to be important; see how He challenges the accepted order of things in our culture; see how He teaches us to re-evaluate life and find a new set of values! It is not the most comforting piece of the Bible you will ever read, but these are amongst the most challenging, heart-searching, positively life-changing words you will ever read, anywhere.

Christian character, being the people Jesus wants us to be. It is hard! At our very best, we are a work in progress; but that’s good enough! God is pleased, He congratulates us when we follow Jesus. The world needs us to be disciples of Jesus; our society needs us to be faithful disciples of Jesus, whether it knows it or not! The world needs role models and people will find them somewhere. I once asked a group of children who they wanted to be like, expecting them to talk about their favourite celebrity or TV personality or footballer. They said Leslie Morse: only two people in this room know him; he was an elder and the treasurer of the Church, well-known in the village, someone the children looked up to! “*You are...*” (5:14) How? By being the living embodiment of Jesus’ values!