

MATTHEW 5:1-12  
"ITS ABOUT CHARACTER"

2014 will be a momentous year, they tell us; there are big issues everywhere.

**The World** – there are issues of Syria and other places of conflict; poverty has not yet gone away and corruption is still very much in evidence. How will we resolve issues that affect the world?

**The Nation** – the referendum in September on independence will set the tone for the future of Scotland. But there are other issues that we will have to deal with as a nation in terms of our political and social attitudes – the same-sex marriage bill, poverty, fuel bills to name but three more! How will we deal with these?

**Sport** – the Commonwealth Games will take place in Glasgow and even if you're not interested in sport, you have to recognise that this is a major event in Scotland; the Ryder Cup will take place at Gleneagles.

**The Church** – will this be the year when finally(?) we will settle the church's view on same-sex relationships and ministry; which view will prevail? Again, there are other issues facing the Church across the nation: questions of money, leadership and the future viability of many congregations, even in our city!

**The Congregation** – there are ongoing choices we face with regard to the future life of congregation, the kind of work that we will do to serve the community; how will our buildings support that ministry? Other issues will arise of which we are not yet aware.

**Personal** – these are always the toughest to predict, because we're never really sure what will come along in any year; there will be events for us to enjoy; there will be difficult things for us to endure; that is simply what life is like. What these are for you will be different from mine, but they will come along at times and we will face up to good things and difficult things.

The question: how will we deal with all of these issues? Over some of these issues, we may well take different points of view and disagree; Christians have always disagreed about political and social issues; indeed there are sincere and committed Christians in every area of the political spectrum. Equally, there are different views on the future of the Church, either nationally or locally and in some way, Christians in Scotland have to navigate our way through some fairly difficult waters over the next few years, both locally and nationally; again there will be a variety of opinions and views about that future. We will have different personal coping mechanisms for our difficult things, personal ways of dealing with what is good and what is hard. One truth through all of this is significant: somehow God is at work. Whatever it is that God is doing, He is still at work in our world, in our nation, in our Church; He has not gone away.

In the end, there is something more important for all of us than many of these headline events. It is all about character. Nothing of what I'm about to say is meant to diminish any of these headline events at all, but is to put them in a slightly different perspective. Someone will win the referendum and we will have to live with the result; the Commonwealth Games and the Ryder Cup will come and go; decisions will be made about the future of the Church and we will react to these decisions as we each see fit. Above all of these, what matters most is the kind of people that we are! Of course, outcomes are important, but there is something more important about the way in which the debate/discussion is carried out. Character matters and people of good character will always make an impression on the world, on society, on the community and the church. That's what we need more than anything across the board.

The Beatitudes: a set of eight sayings at the start of the piece we call the Sermon on the Mount. Sayings that all have the same form and that open up for us eight

different qualities of Christian character. There are all kinds of ways of summarising them, but perhaps the easiest way is to say that these qualities show us what people are like when God is King! This is what life looks like when Jesus is Lord of our lives. These are not eight separate groups of people; these are eight qualities of the same group of people, those who are disciples of Jesus. This is Christian character, “balanced and variegated” (John Stott) These are people on whom the blessing of God rests. We’ll take a quick look at them in a moment, but suffice to say we are a work in progress. This is the ideal picture painted by Jesus; this is the goal to which we should aspire; this is the ideal from which we all fall short. If you want a solid resolution for the New Year – be more like this character? The thrust of these qualities is quite against the grain. For each 1 of these, the world has something else to offer or to go after. To be proud, powerful, arrogant, rich?

We don’t have time to look at all eight qualities in detail, but Jesus commends humility, being merciful and forgiving, being the peacemaker. Let’s have a look at the fourth one: “*Blessed are...*” (*Matthew 5:6*) What would the world have us hunger for? Power, wealth, influence, success, thrills and excitement? All of these are attractive: there is something alluring for us about all that the world puts on offer. But Jesus would have us hunger and thirst for “Righteousness”. This means three things in the Bible: first of all, a right relationship with God, with forgiveness for our faults and sins, a sense of being at peace with God, being loved and accepted by the Father; secondly, being the right kind of people, living the right kind of life, with qualities of right living, doing the right thing; thirdly, justice for the world, especially for those who are poor and oppressed. There is no need to choose one of these over the others, but it is quite possible that Jesus means all three! Do we hunger for a right relationship with God, knowing that we are forgiven, loved, accepted; do we hunger to be the right kind of people; do we hunger for justice for everyone in an ill-divided world? Is that what drives us on? That kind of hunger? Or are we hungry for something else?

The Beatitudes all talk about the kind of people that we are inside! At least three of these qualities point us in same direction: “*Blessed are...*” (*Matthew 5:3*) “*Blessed are...*” (*Matthew 5:5*) “*Blessed are...*” (*Matthew 5:7*) It is so easy to misunderstand these, especially ‘the meek’: if we were to paint a picture of someone meek, we’d be inclined to draw someone being down-trodden, a bit of a doormat, someone weak, someone that everyone else just tramples all over. In fact, meekness is not weakness; meekness is simply a true view of ourselves that sees our strengths and our faults and as a result, we are people who don’t throw our weight about! ‘Poor in spirit’ people know that we have nothing of our own to boast about, but rely totally on the grace of God. The ‘merciful’ are those who, so infused by grace from God, are gracious towards others, willing to forgive and treat one another well. There is a real spirit of humility in people with these qualities, the humility to see ourselves as we are and then to depend on the grace of God.

These are people on whom God’s blessing rests. Each of these qualities has a blessing attached. “*Blessed are...*” (*Matthew 5:6*) This person will find all that he or she is looking for, that right relationship with God, that right character, justice in the world. Others have other blessings attached and some of them are huge ideas. Have a look at them again when you go home. Here is the big picture: these are people on whom the blessing of God rests; people on whom God looks with favour; the Kingdom of heaven belongs to these people; they will see God; they will be children of God. How much time do we spend trying to make other people like us? Maybe you really don’t care what other people think of you; if so, you are a rare bird indeed. Many of us say we don’t care, but deep down we want other people to like us; we want to be part of in-group, the gang; we want to be accepted and loved. How little

time and energy, in comparison, do we spend making sure that God's favour rests on our lives? We are a people greatly blessed!

Justin Welby, in his New Year address told us that we should strive to become more and more like Nelson Mandela! I have nothing against Mandela and in the circumstances of his address and what he was saying, I can understand why the Archbishop urged us to become more and more like Mandela. But there is a greater and better role model for Christians in 2014 – Jesus Himself! When we look at these eight qualities in the Beatitudes, we say that this is the ideal to which we should aspire, but sadly they are also the ideal from which we all fall short in one way or another. But Jesus fulfilled these perfectly and completely. You want to know what the Beatitudes look like in practice, in a real life, then look at Jesus. He was all of these eight qualities and He was them completely. Do you want a New Year resolution for 2014 that will go beyond next week? “Lord, make me more and more like Jesus!” We are a work in progress!

Jeremiah was set a task by God: “Go up...” (*Jeremiah 5:1*) It seems reasonable, to find one man whose life is lived with honesty and integrity. That one righteous man will save the city; if Jeremiah finds such a man, the city will be saved, the people forgiven. He looks among the poor; he looks among the leaders. What does he find? He finds people who have a veneer of goodness and religion and faith, people who use the right words, but underneath, inside, they are very different. They are people whose hearts are like stone, who refuse to listen to other people, even to the prophet and the word of the Lord; they are a people who have given up the ways of the Lord, “broken off...” (*Jeremiah 5:5*) We would hope to find more than one such person in our community, should we go looking, but the point is this: character is important and we lose something so significant when that kind of character is missing. Those who seek the ways of the Lord are few and becoming fewer in our nation and in our community, yet the influence of Christian character is immense beyond our understanding.

Character matters. We come at this with two attitudes: first of all, with repentance for our shortcomings; we are not the people we should be, we are not the people that God wants us to be. The overwhelming impression when read the Beatitudes is how far short of these qualities we fall. Let's not be complacent and say “it doesn't matter”; it matters more than we know; so we come with repentance in our hearts for the ways in which we have failed and fallen short. Secondly, we aspire to be better, to have more and more Christ-like character, to be more and more like Jesus, to have these qualities in our lives more and more and to work and pray to make our hopes and aspirations come true. Take these qualities away with you today; mull them over; make them your aim.

Character matters. Almost more than anything else in life, it matters to be the right kind of person. More than having power and influence; more than wealth and possessions; more than success and pleasure – character counts for more than all of these. I will be voting in the referendum; I will be rooting for Scotland in the Commonwealth Games; I will be hoping Europe win the Ryder Cup; I will be working hard to play my part in growing the Church and the congregation; but I hope and pray that most of all, I will be working to be the right kind of person. I've not always got it right; I'm well aware of that. I pray that I will become more and more like Jesus. Will you join me in that prayer and aspiration?