

MATTHEW 5:4  
ON OUR KNEES?

Rotherham - such an appalling situation has been revealed and described. How have you reacted to what you have heard? With shock, horror, and a deep sense of dismay? Have you shed any tears for the children and young people abused over such a long period of time in that city? They tell us that similar things happen in other places. Is there a sense of sadness, that we should "mourn the loss of innocence, righteousness, self-respect"? The House of Commons Home Affairs Select Committee has been investigating; it is not always riveting TV, but they have called various people from South Yorkshire to the committee to answer questions and were dismayed to say least at the attitude of some. Insensitive, unwilling to accept any responsibility for situation and a refusal to resign – these were some of their conclusions on these people. I don't know enough to comment on the rights and wrongs of their actions, but it does not sit well when so many young people are victims and some who should have acted to protect these children are now doing more to protect their own reputations. There are no tears there!

Here's another story, this time from the Bible and about king David. He has a friend, an uncomfortable friend, who is also a prophet. Nathan is his name. Nathan tells David a story about a rich man who has everything and lots of it; he also has a neighbour who is poor. When the rich man has visitors, he sends his servant to the poor man and takes the poor man's pet lamb to provide the food for the banquet, rather than one of the many lambs in the rich man's own flock. David is outraged at this; he is deeply angry at what he sees as a gross injustice. There is a sting in the tail of this story: "*Then Nathan...*" (2 Samuel 12:7) David has stolen the wife of one of his best soldiers and then tried to cover it up, eventually arranging the death of Uriah. After Uriah was killed in battle, David took his wife Bathseba to be his own wife. "*You are the man!*" The story tells us that "*David said...*" (2 Sam 12:13) Read Psalm 51, perhaps written in the aftermath of this affair, written to fill out that simple sentence; there you will read David expressing his deep sense of remorse and repentance, accepting responsibility for his faults and failings, confessing it all before God!

Last week, we began a series of sermons on values, looking at our Christian values from Jesus' view through the Beatitudes. The Beatitudes is series of eight sayings in Matthew chapter 5, in which Jesus opens up a set of values that are at heart of what it means to be a disciple. These are not eight groups of people, but eight qualities of the one group, the disciples of Jesus. Last week, we thought about what it means to be poor in spirit, with the sense of coming to God with empty hands, having nothing to boast about, depending totally on Jesus. We saw then that poor does not equal nothing and being useless, because being poor in spirit creates space for grace and God promises the kingdom of heaven, a blessing beyond price. This is a quality to seek after, the sense of depending on Jesus and being shaped by grace.

Today , we consider the second of these sayings: "*Blessed are...*" (Matthew 5:4) Now, it is totally and entirely true that God comforts those who mourn; we know that and many of us are greatly blessed by the comforting grace of God when we mourn someone's death. But that is not a quality to search for! Jesus must mean something else. Hopefully, there is a clue in our opening stories: this is about our reaction to our faults, failings, mistakes, and shortcomings; the Bible's shorthand word for all of these is 'sin'. We are not perfect people; we have made mistakes; we get things wrong; we rebel against God to go our own way. Anyone who tells you that they have none of these is being economical with the truth; none of us is perfect and all of us have messed up life in some way or another in this regard. Maybe it is nothing on the scale of Rotherham, or nothing on the scale of David's adultery and conspiracy to

kill, but in that respect, it is only a matter of degree! We wake up this morning to the news of the death of David Haines, the hostage in Iraq: there are two reactions – first of all, to feel sad for his family and mourn with them; and secondly, to be deeply sad and angry at another display of evil in the world.

Here's a question: how do we react to that kind of sin, either in ourselves or in world? There are people around who will tell you that it is all the fault of the environment in which they live that they do bad things, or the fact that they are unemployed. You might remember a few years ago, some people were shot and killed in Birmingham around Christmas time and some of blame was placed on the kind of music that the killers listened to. I was involved in a little debating group of sixth-year pupils in Currie High School at the time and they suggested we debate the influence of music on people's behaviour; one side argued for, that music does influence the way in which people behave, and the other argued against and the young people put forward all of the arguments that they had heard. After we'd done the debate, we chatted and they all said that music doesn't have that kind of influence and that we need to take responsibility for our own actions. We can't avoid that sense of responsibility.

Jesus says: "*Blessed are...*" (*Matthew 5:4*) Here's a Bible word that is forgotten in many places now: "repentance". It is a word that has so much to it: basically it is about turning life around, changing direction. We have gone our own way, having been rebels against God and we turn our lives around to seek Jesus and be the kind of people Jesus wants us to be. But in making that U-turn, there are other things here: we are sorry, we have regrets in life; "*I hate the sins that made thee mourn, and drove thee from my breast*" says Wm Cowper about his faults and failures two hundred years ago, as he prays for a closer walk with God in Hymn 552. Or as John Stott sums it up in words I've already quoted: (We are) "those who mourn the loss of their innocence, their righteousness, their self-respect...the sorrow of repentance." Sorry is not an easy word to say to people that we see and that we hurt and it not always an easy word to say to God either, but that is where we start, with a sense of having failed and we express that sense of regret before God. "*What a wretched man I am. Who will rescue me from this body of death?*" (*Romans 7:24*)

"*The sacrifices...*" (*Psalms 51:17*) I've already mentioned Psalm 51, which is generally taken to be David's expression of repentance. Till Nathan woke him up, it seems as if David was simply trying to sweep it all under the carpet. Nothing was said; nobody mentioned it; the palace staff must have known; the army commander knew something was afoot. But David's heart is resolutely shut; this was one part of David's life that needed sorting! After Nathan's story, David's spirit totally different; he's not hiding anymore; he's not trying to pretend anymore that it hadn't happened; he's now coming to God, mourning his sin, mourning his failure, with a broken and contrite spirit in him, saying sorry, ready to change. We come to God on our knees, to bow humbly before Him admitting our faults and failings, sorry for the ways in which we have failed, with a sense of regret. We mourn the fact that we have lost our innocence, that we are not perfect; that we have grieved God.

We mourn not only that internal sense of sin, but other ways too. Jesus was riding into Jerusalem on Palm Sunday and Luke tells us that He wept over the city. Jesus mourned over the sins of others: in this case He wept over a city that had lost its way, refusing to recognise Jesus, refusing to listen to His call to repent, people unwilling to open their eyes to the ways in which they had let God down. Jesus weeps for what He sees in world. It might be Rotherham; it might be Cambodia where many are poor and are victims of corruption and oppression; it might be Sierra Leone, one of the richest countries on the planet in its resources, yet the money is being taken out of

the country in corrupt payments to big business; it might be any 1 of other situations of injustice and oppression that leave us feeling - what? That leave us feeling angry, yes; but leave us also weeping for a world which allows these wrongs to carry on; do we mourn for victims and people powerless to change things for themselves? We weep over our own sins and sins of others; we might not like it; it may not make us feel bright and cheery, but it is there; it is part of life; it is something we need to deal with and step one is to mourn the loss of innocence, righteousness, self-respect! We come with a contrite spirit, in repentance.

*"Blessed are..." (Matthew 5:4)* Here is the light at the end of this dark tunnel. Jesus promises blessing for those who have this quality. Let me repeat what I said last week: some versions say "happy are those who..." so today would be "happy are the unhappy!" But this is more than how I feel; this is more than just making me happy and feel better. This is much bigger; this is the blessing of God on our lives. What blessing can God offer that will comfort us as we mourn our sin? Nothing other than free and full forgiveness. The best comfort that God gives to us is the good news that sins are forgiven. David again: *"If you..." (Psalm 130:3f)* The slate is wiped clean; everything that stands against us, God forgives and treats us as if it never existed. The news that sins are forgiven is meant to be a delight, is meant to comfort us in the deepest possible way. What other comfort can we have when we are kneeling before God confessing our faults and failures, but that God then says to us "your sins are forgiven!" The father, when his prodigal son came home, welcomed him home as if he'd done nothing wrong and treated him as his son all over again. That's what forgiveness looks like.

How marvellous this is! We are forgiven people. We come on our knees, humbly; we leave with a spring in our step; our sins are forgiven and we are free. If there ever was a slate with our names at the top and all our faults, failings, and misdemeanours listed on it, it is wiped clean, and there is nothing left. God has done this for us because Jesus has died. The love and grace of God are poured into our hearts because Jesus has died on the cross to take all of that sin on Himself. Because He did this, because He died in our place, we are free and forgiven. Forgiveness is one of the hardest things to accept: we can say "I believe in the forgiveness of sins" and it's general, in theory; but we find it so much harder to say "I know that my sins are forgiven" and yet that is the comfort that Jesus gives us, not that there is forgiveness for sins in general and in theory, but that our sins are forgiven; its personal, its real, its true. This is the comfort that Jesus gives to us.

Someone suggested that people come to church to be entertained and go elsewhere to be challenged! Not with this! Here is a profoundly challenging value, even uncomfortable to begin with. It challenges us to look at ourselves honestly, to see that there are faults and failings, and that we can't ignore them and sweep them under the carpet. We acknowledge our faults and mistakes; they are there; we are sorry that we have let God down and have not been the kind of people He wants us to be. We mourn our loss of innocence, righteousness, self-respect; we come on our knees! But here's the delight, the deep delight that you will find nowhere else on the planet but in the gospel: there is forgiveness and not just in general, not just in theory, but in person and it is for us and it comes from God because Jesus has died. If you're saying "how can God forgive a person like me; I've made such a mess of things?" That's kind of God He is and Jesus has died to take away your sins. Praise be to the God who has comforted us with the comfort that only Jesus can give!