**3rd July 2016**

**Matthew 5.1-16**

It has been quite a week for this country. Thank goodness for Wales. They were dancing in the streets of unpronounceable locations last night. Take that Brussels. Several million England supporters are checking their birth certificates to see if they are actually Welsh.

England are the only country to exit Europe twice in one week. What with the EU referendum result and the Football team being knocked out.

There have been a number of jokes doing the rounds:

Iceland is supposed to be cheap but the England Goalkeeper Joe Hart saved nothing..

In a parody of one of the infamous Leave Campaign slogans, the England team bus had a strap line: England’s Football Team are worth £350 million. Let’s spend it on the NHS.

Some are even campaigning for a debate in Parliament for a rematch like the call for a second Referendum.

You have to laugh – or else you cry.

The EU Vote has left the country bitterly divided with passionate advocates on both sides believing either that we have done the right thing or made a big mistake. The debate though has unleashed a lot of negative emotions and recriminations, bitterness, hatred, and even out and out racism. Hate crimes have increased by 500% in the last week. No one knows the long term outcome of this vote so there is a lot of anxiety and uncertainty around. That is likely to continue for the next few years. Something had been boiling up in our country and like any acrimonious divorce the road ahead threatens to be volatile and stormy. In the meantime there are calls to stay together and work together to make the best of it. I guess the dust will have to settle first and perhaps a two month prime ministerial leadership campaign will allow a certain amount of cooling off time.

Seven people have cast their vote this morning and have decided to declare their choice in following Jesus Christ and are being made members of this church. Like Brexit we cannot predict the future with certainty. But the call to follow Christ will be challenging but is also a call to strive for the Kingdom of God and what builds up, heals, restores and does ultimate good.

This last weekend over 50 of us of all ages went on a Church Weekend and in the midst of having fun and fellowship we considered the issues of God’s justice and looked at the passion of Jesus for our world. We considered issues of trade and economics, debt and poverty, equality, racism and gender. Through all of that we read our bibles again and looked at the passion of Jesus in his life and teachings for those who seek justice in this world.

The reading for today is the famous Beatitudes – the start of the Sermon on the Mount. It was Jesus’ manifesto in which he unpacked his compelling vision for life in the Kingdom of God – a vision he would systematically live out over the next three years. The crowds had travelled from across the region. We can spend a lot of time trying to get people to come and hear the message of Christ but when you look at Jesus his problem was getting away from people. They came to listen to him because they wanted to. His message was quite simply the best they had ever heard. So what was it that was so compelling about Jesus? What compels us to follow him today when many choose not too?

His message then was radically different from the other religious leaders of first century Israel. In their eyes you were a sinner if you were a Gentile, a non-Jew, a tax collector, a shepherd or involved in a dozen other ‘dirty jobs’; if you were unfortunate to suffer from leprosy, or blindness or any other incurable complaint or disease, or if you had broken one of hundreds of petty laws they had established. They believed that if you were poor, your poverty was in some ways your own fault and suggested you weren’t a good person. Wealth and riches suggested that God had blessed you. The Pharisees were into holiness. They believed that if the people could somehow keep all the religious rules then God would accept them. They were very concerned not to be defiled by sinners – associating with the wrong people and the wrong things was like contracting a virus that polluted and contaminated your soul.

So Jesus is standing up on this mountainside and looking around at all the ordinary people there – the disenfranchised, the oppressed, the excluded, the sick and despised and he knew things had to change. All the discriminatory labels the religious leaders had previously pinned on these people that had denied them dignity, privilege, honour, political enfranchisement, relationship with God and access to community had to be torn down. Such discrimination could have no part in the Kingdom ruled by God. So into this world of ‘ins’ and ‘outs’, , ‘haves and have-nots’, righteous and sinful’, ‘remains and leaves’, came the piercing words of Jesus: ‘God will bless you people who are spiritually poor; God will bless you hungry people… God will bless you people who are crying…’ He looked into people’s eyes and announced: ‘God’s kingdom belongs to you!’

So why are the people in these categories blessed? The answer is simple: they are blessed because of God’s generosity or grace. Put bluntly, the blessing of God comes to them not because of their condition but in spite of it. The beatitudes form a list of the categories of those who knew what it was to be shunned by the establishment. They were the spiritually destitute, not the spiritually capable. For them Jesus’ message was a revolution in the truest sense of the word – from now on those ‘lasts’ would be ‘first’ ahead of those who were far too certain of their righteousness and religious credentials.

That message runs through the gospels. Cut into the accounts of Jesus life and at any point you will see the thing writ large and bold. The lepers are healed, the blind can see, the dead are raised, the poor hear good news. The tax collectors and prostitutes are welcomed by Jesus, not judged by him, and in that love and acceptance they become changed. Those excluded now become the recipients of good news.

So you want to follow Jesus – you have to follow that. Be an agent for healing, justice, inclusion and helping people reconnect with God and with each other. The word ‘Religion’ comes from the root word ‘reconnect’. God created us to have relationship with Him and with each other. Religion in its purest and best sense is about reconnection – finding the life that will reconnect us to ourselves, each other and to God. Then we will be blessed.

If Jesus preached his Sermon on the Mount today who would he include on the list? God bless you who are lonely, ugly, old, anorexic, bullied, infertile, gay, transgendered, the displaced refugees, immigrants, overworked, redundant, underpaid, homeless, unemployed, abused – God’s kingdom belongs to you!’ And if he did, would the Church, would the respectable people, love him or hate him for it?

When Jesus stared his ministry he came into a synagogue: the church of his time. He read from the prophet Isaiah ; ‘The Spirit of the Lord is on me,
    because he has anointed me
    to proclaim good news to the poor.
He has sent me to proclaim freedom for the prisoners
    and recovery of sight for the blind,
to set the oppressed free,
**19**    to proclaim the year of the Lord’s favour.’

All well and good you may say, except that Jesus went on to to say how this Good news would go to Gentiles, and lepers and other unclean people. The people of the synagogue got up and drove Jesus out of town in their anger and fury.

If you follow Jesus you may provoke a reaction. Hopefully if they are angry with you then it is about gospel values and not just because you are annoying.

There has been a lot of anger towards the poor in the EU Referendum. A lot of the post-industrial northern and midland towns voted solidly to leave the EU. A lot of them have blamed immigration for their plight. A number of commentators suggest that those who had least to lose, indeed those who have lost out on the supposed prosperity brought through globalisation, voted to leave – more as a protest vote at the status quo and the political elite. I can understand that. We reap the decades of growing inequality in this country and it’s a dangerous thing when societies become so unequal. Where is the good news? Who’s going to work for it?

Jesus calls us salt of the earth and light for the world. Before his audience on that hill could catch their breath he called them salt of the earth. They must have been thinking ‘Us? Salt? We’ve always been told we were scum!’ There must have been a lot of people chuckling to themselves that day.

Jesus consistently refused to employ the ‘sin management’ technique of nagging and yelling at people. He never pushed, forced, bludgeoned, beat, cajoled, coerced of bullied. He believed in the carrot not the stick. He knew how to draw people to him rather than away. He won people. His belief in them inspired them. And with this acceptance came the challenge to change.

‘If salt no longer tastes like salt how can it make food salty? Don’t let your light be hidden under a bush’. Condemnation and judgment are the wrong tools for the task. Recognition of who they are and encouragement to achieve their true potential are far more appropriate. These people had probably never asked themselves ‘Do I believe in God’ so much as ‘Does God believe in me?’ and Jesus’ answer is an affirming and reassuring ‘Yes!’ so redefining all the social and religious assumptions of his day.

He is the opposite to the Pharisees who insisted that people change before they could be included or belong. They put a huge doorstep that people had to clamber over in order to become the people of God. Jesus on the other hand included people first. He offered them the reality of belonging to God’s kingdom, which naturally led them to thinking about who they were and what their lifestyles were like and how just and peaceful and meaningful were they living? Jesus lowered the doorstep so that more could feel invited to belong.

All those coming into membership today are telling different tales about how they came to belong and find faith and find themselves on a journey – following Jesus and discovering more about what it means to belong to the kingdom of God. We journey with you.

Together we are called to be salt and light – even more so at this moment in time for our nation. May you and we know we are Blessed by God.

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