



# *Fourth Sunday of Epiphany*

## *Sermon by Revd Matthew Wright*



29 January 2023

### READINGS

Micah 6:1-8; Psalm 15; 1 Corinthians 1:18-31; Matthew 5:1-12

## *God's nature and God's mission.*

We have an interesting set of readings this Sunday which, I think, are instructive in so far as they tell us something important about God's nature and God's mission. So let us in fact consider these two things today – God's nature and God's mission.

When we talk about the nature of God, we are asking questions like “who is God?”, “what is God like?”, “what are some of the qualities and attributes of God?” In classical, or orthodox, theology there are typical attributes of God which are fairly standard – omnipotence, omniscience, omnipresence (all the omnies), qualities like being infinite in space and time, being uncreated, being immutable (unchanging), because how can you change if you are perfect? You can't go from a state of perfection to a state of greater perfection. That implies that you weren't perfect to begin with.

These are some of the classical attributes of God. And they are all very lovely, and they speak to God's power, and glory and majesty. I'm not sure though how helpful they are in creating a picture of God which we can all relate to. The picture created by virtue of these classical attributes seems a bit removed from our human condition. And being the season of Epiphany, we have recently celebrated the Incarnation of Christ, we know that the import of the Incarnation is that God was born into the human condition.

Martin Luther, the great Reformer, contrasted what he referred to as a theology of the cross with a theology of glory. Incidentally, one of the texts his theology of the cross was based on is our NT lesson from 1 Corinthians. You see, if you strip everything away, the cross is really a symbol of shame, suffering and defeat. Now when I say those words, “shame, suffering and defeat,” they don't sound very pleasing. And generally these are things we try at all costs to avoid – shame, suffering, and defeat. Indeed, these things are shunned and frowned upon, and it was not so different in antiquity.

The one aspect of the crucifixion which we sometimes fail to appreciate is that within first-century Judaism, to be crucified, literally meant one was cursed by God (Paul explains this in Galatians). If I ask the question: do you wish to be cursed by God? We all answer “no”, because no one in their right mind wishes to be cursed by God, and yet this is what the cross represented in its original context from the perspective of first-century Judaism. This is why Paul describes it as a stumbling block to Jews and foolishness to Gentiles.

Now we come back to the nature and mission of God. While we do not wish to dispute the classical or orthodox attributes of God, we see, as far as God is revealed through the person of Jesus Christ, a rather different picture emerging. Here is a God who is revealed ultimately through weakness, through suffering, through shame, through humiliation, through failure, again, none of the things we wish to readily associate with. And in case you think this is just Paul's personal theological spin on things, this ethic or ethos is reflected throughout the ministry of Jesus himself. Take our Gospel reading, for example. In the beatitudes, Jesus lists groups of people who are especially blessed in the eyes of God. Matthew has sneakily changed what was probably a more original version in Luke so if I can take some liberty and use Luke's version instead of Matthew's, according to Jesus, those who are blessed by God are the poor, the hungry, and the hated. So we see and we know that this is completely opposed to conventional wisdom and its really something we'd rather hope is not true.

And here perhaps is where Matthew's version is helpful, he spiritualises the beatitudes, so it's not just the poor who are blessed, but the poor in spirit, it's not those who are hungry who are blessed, but those who hunger and thirst for righteousness. So I guess you can say he makes poverty and hunger an existential state of being for those who are not literally poor and hungry.

Unless and until we go there, unless we are forced to enter this state, and by the way, we are usually drawn there by God (remember that it is the Spirit of God who leads Jesus into the desert, into a place of desolation and detachment, for the express purpose of being tested by Satan, it is God's Spirit who takes him there) unless we are forced to enter this state, none of what I have been saying over the last 8 minutes is going to make any sense.

It's usually only once you go there that the penny drops and there's a paradigm shift. You may have an inkling, you might intuit that there is a grain of truth in what I am saying, but until you go there yourself – as Paul says the message of the cross is a stumbling block to Jews and foolishness to Gentiles. It's a stumbling block to the Jewish mindset which represents the overly religious mindset, the mindset that is preoccupied with purity and cleanliness and righteousness, which prides itself on being correct and right. It's foolishness to the Gentiles, which represents secular mindset, which is obsessed with success, which demeans and denigrates failure, which is obsessed with glory, fame and wealth. All of this is not to discourage us. On the contrary, it is to affirm and support you and to give you the assurance that when these things happen, and they will happen because they are necessary to our spiritual journey, it's to give you the assurance that, though it may not seem like it, God is with you, and you will emerge a changed person, a resurrected person.