

The Swiss Church in London

Sermon 3 February 2019

Reading

Matthew 4:23-5:11

When Jesus saw the crowds, he went up the mountain; and after he sat down, his disciples came to him. Then he began to speak, and taught them, saying:

‘Blessed are the poor in spirit, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven.

‘Blessed are those who mourn, for they will be comforted.

‘Blessed are the meek, for they will inherit the earth.

‘Blessed are those who hunger and thirst for righteousness, for they will be filled.

‘Blessed are the merciful, for they will receive mercy.

‘Blessed are the pure in heart, for they will see God.

‘Blessed are the peacemakers, for they will be called children of God.

‘Blessed are those who are persecuted for righteousness’ sake, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven.

‘Blessed are you when people revile you and persecute you and utter all kinds of evil against you falsely on my account. Rejoice and be glad, for your reward is great in heaven, for in the same way they persecuted the prophets who were before you.

Sermon

A great speech

“I have a dream that one day on the red hills of Georgia, the sons of former slaves and the sons of former slave owners will be able to sit down together at the table of brotherhood. I have a dream that my four little children will one day live in a nation where they will not be judged by the color of their skin but by the content of their character.”

This is no doubt one of the most famous speeches of the 20th century. It was delivered to over 250'000 people by Reverend Martin Luther King, the leader of the American Civil Rights movement, on the 28th of August 1963 during the march on Washington to call an end to racism in the United States.

What makes a speech great?

Is it the purpose? Is it the way the speaker engages with the audience, or the passion with which the speech is delivered? Is it the level of practice put into delivering it? The circumstances, or the course of history? In fact, it can be all or any of them.

Some speeches inspire people for generations to come. Some speeches change the course of history. Words can be powerful, in both a hurtful and an empowering way. They can lift us up or bring us down. We all have experienced the power of words in our lives.

The way speeches are delivered has changed dramatically over the past decades. The advent of mass media has had a profound effect on the influence of the spoken word. Influential

speakers are no longer trying to inspire a few people in a room, they are addressing millions via radio, television and social media.

Some of you will vividly remember the Queen's first Christmas address broadcast on television in 1957 speaking directly into people's living rooms. It was a truly historic event! The Queen's father was the first King to speak on the radio and reached out to his subjects in an unprecedented way. It changed the monarchy and it changed how the sovereign was seen by the people.

The social circumstances

One of the most important speeches of all times, and certainly the most important speech in the Bible for us Christians, is the Sermon on the Mount. Jesus' sermon is nothing short of revolutionary. He turns the social order of his time on its head. It was the poor, not the rich, the mournful, not the happy-go-lucky, the meek, not those who threw their weight around, the merciful, not the hard-nosed realists, and so on, who were blessed by God. The standards God required weren't measured by external acts but by inner attitudes.

Why was this so revolutionary? To understand this better, it helps to look at the social circumstances and political order of the time.

The society Jesus grew up in was in many aspects very different from what we are used to today. There was no social security, and for most people a bad crop or a tax rise could be catastrophic. It wasn't uncommon that girls were abandoned after birth as they were a greater financial burden for a family.

Slavery was common, and although the influence of Greek ideals and culture led to more inner freedom and to a more equal recognition of slaves, the external political circumstances didn't change. A slave rarely became a free man.

News travelled slowly and people's horizon was mainly local. The main lines of businesses were farming, winegrowing, fishing, trade and sheep farming.

Jesus grew up in a Jewish family. His family went regularly to the synagogue and that's also where he was educated. The Roman Empire was generally tolerant towards other religions and Judaism could be practiced freely. However, there were some conflicts. For the Romans the Emperor was the representative of God on earth and had to be worshipped accordingly, a belief that Jewish people did not share. For them, the divine power of God was separate from the earthly power of the Emperor. Yet Jewish people were not forced to worship the Emperor and were left in peace – unless their religious practice caused public turmoil.

Within Judaism there were different sub-groups. Some of them aimed to live according to religious law within the existing social and political structures, others were more radical and sought to overturn the structures that kept people unfree and in poverty. The Jesus movement was one such radical group that caused quite a bit of turmoil by challenging the social order of the time. The Sermon on the Mount is an expression of these radical social views.

Jesus spoke to people who had little power. He spoke to the fishermen and carpenters, to the farmers and winegrowers,

normal everyday people. He also spoke to the less fortunate, the sick, poor and marginalised. He promoted equality between men and women and defended the humanity of slaves. All this was a threat to the social order. He did all this in the name of Jahwe, the God of the Jewish people, which challenged the authority of the Roman Emperor. He said that they owed nothing to the Emperor but the tax. They were free – at least in spirit – and this new won internal freedom was the seed that would eventually lead to external freedom too.

Words can set something in us free. But words can also shatter us. We carry a huge responsibility in how we use words. Our words can empower, our words can discourage and hurt. Our words can be brutally honest, and sometimes they have to be.

Shining lights

A few weeks ago at the World Economic Forum in Davos Greta Thunberg, a 16 year old Swedish teenager, spoke to a room full of mainly male world leaders. She talked about climate change. She said: “Our house is on fire. I am here to say, our house is on fire. Adults keep saying: ‘We owe it to the young people to give them hope.’ But I don’t want your hope. I don’t want you to be hopeful. I want you to panic. I want you to feel the fear I feel every day. And then I want you to act.”

Greta’s speech was shared on social networks and has reached millions of people empowering young adults like her to share their fears and join climate change movements.

In the Sermon of the Mount, immediately following the Beatitudes that we have heard today, Jesus says: “*You are the light of the world. A city built on a hill cannot be hid. No one*

after lighting a lamp puts it under the bushel basket, but on the lampstand, and it gives light to all in the house. In the same way let your light shine before others.” (Matthew 5:14)

We need more people who let their light shine using their talents and gifts to inspire the world. In fact, we all have talents and gifts that we need to share with the world, in words and deeds. To follow Christ means to put our own light on the lampstand for everyone to shine. It also means to encourage others to let their light shine. In a world full of shining lights there is no room for jealousy or mistrust or envy. In a world full of shining lights there is room for everyone to become the best version of themselves. In a world full of shining lights we can build a better future together. This for me is the Kingdom of God, already here and yet to be built.

It takes courage to let our light shine. Let us begin today.

Amen