

Rhythm of Prayer in Lent 2018

(40 days from Wednesday 14 Feb.)

based upon the Beatitudes

This scheme of guided prayer rests upon two principles of the Reformation, which have guided the Church of Scotland in its worship of God. The first: All we bring to our salvation is faith. The rest is what God gives, 'by grace you have been saved, through faith – and this not from yourselves, it is the gift of God – not by works, so that no-one can boast.'

Secondly: We have been provided with a Bible we can read, and taught to read from childhood. 'Study to present yourself to God as one approved, a worker who does not need to be ashamed and who correctly handles the word of truth.'

I encourage you with me to read the Beatitudes of Jesus, about the categories of people Jesus taught were in line to receive both the blessing of God, and his blessing. They are listed in St. Matthew's Gospel chapter 5 verses 1-12. Read them aloud, paying fresh attention to what you understand from the words of Jesus, at a time you choose each day, if possible at the same time.

Beginning on a day of the first week, on or shortly after 14 February, take a length of time as long as a favourite television programme to study one of the categories Jesus gives. To do this, match the sort of people Jesus calls blessed with some passages of the history of God's people in the Bible, which tell the story of ones who were, for example, merciful or pure in heart. On the back of the guide you'll find a number of passages of the Bible relating to the blessing categories, and you may well find some others come to mind.

When you have begun in this way to explore examples from the Bible of one or two Beatitudes and have made notes from your study, take a separate time to ponder in your heart the meaning of it for your own life. Let it open onto a path of prayer; pray that your own life may share in the blessing Jesus declares for this type of person, and that others may be awakened to the truth of it for their lives.

It is hoped that after Lent finishes we can organise a time to share with one another what we have found in the rhythm of prayer season. Has anything changed for us ?

Note: to find chapter and verse in the 66 titles of books in the Bible, turn to the beginning of your Bible where you'll find a contents page giving details of all the books and on what page to find them.

While I was writing this, I watched a video of an early version by Johnny Cash of his song, Get Rhythm, which was inspired by a happy shoeshine kid in the Southern States of America. The original song eloquently illustrates that attitudes of kindness and service make the humblest task shine.



Jesus said, Blessed are the poor in spirit. The people of the Jews were reduced to a remnant of what had been two proud nations in the 70 years they were exiled from their land after conquest by Babylon in 587BC. Yet we read at that time, new attention was given to the old scriptures, people listened again for what God would make known to them – Nehemiah chapter 8.

Blessed are those who mourn. Expressing grief and the pain of loss is allowed in the Bible. There are many examples in the Psalms (e.g. Psalm 88) and in Job (e.g. chapter 6). The book of Ruth is about the provision in the Law of Moses for the care of a younger and an older widowed woman and is full of comfort for those who mourn that God still has a plan for us after loss.

Blessed are the meek. 'The meek shall inherit the earth' is a promise contained in Psalm 37 verse 11. The whole psalm encourages believers to keep hoping in God and doing good even when 'the prosperity of the wicked' is staring them in the face. The same outlook is in the New Testament promise, 'whoever trusts in the Lord will not be put to shame.' Here is spiritual resilience.

Blessed are those who hunger and thirst for righteousness. Joseph in prison (Genesis chapter 40) and Esther when she has to intervene to save her people and fasts before she takes action (Esther chapter 4) set this category before us.

Blessed are the merciful. This recalls the song from 'Les Miserables' Let him live ! David had his rival and enemy in his grasp; his men were urging him to kill him. David spared him and even sought to reason with him ! (1 Samuel chapter 24) A story which intrigues me about mercy is Esau's mercy towards Jacob in Genesis 32 and 33 – in the rest of scripture Esau is not among the saints yet here he's radiant !

Blessed are the pure in heart. In the first chapter of 1 Samuel there's a story of Hannah, a distraught woman in a time when there were few visions and God seemed very remote. Then at verse 17, 18 it's as if a light comes on in her. She trusts God and knows what she will do, walking in God's smile.

Blessed are the peacemakers. Though the man of peace in Psalm 120 complains about others who are not so minded, he does not take the law into his own hands; he shares his complaint with God and continues to act peacefully towards his neighbours. In Genesis chapter 26 we observe the patience of Isaac in disputes over the right to precious water supplies in an arid terrain.

Blessed are those who are persecuted because of righteousness. Persecution is found on a broad spectrum. From lack of support you might have expected across to opposition to your right to hold any opinion, any place, indeed to wish you dead. Righteousness is a key concern in the Bible, doing what is right in God's eyes without fear or favour, but anyone who does this will not necessarily have a pleasant career. The story of Joseph illustrates this in Genesis 37, 39-50. Also Amos the prophet, see chapter 7.