

## **From Ordinary to Extraordinary**

*Bishop's Sermon, Matthew 5:1-11, All Saints Day 2020*

It seemed a good idea at the time. A few of us were sitting round sharing fundraising ideas for a Ugandan charity we support, when someone suggested a sponsored walk. 'Why don't we retrace the steps of Mary Jones?', Ian said, 'that Welsh girl who walked barefoot to the town of Bala to buy a Bible?'

It seemed a good idea at the time – that is, until Ian started to spell out the details. 'It's 28 miles', he said, 'not too difficult under foot though there's the odd rather steep gradient, and a few bogs to negotiate. Mary Jones did it at night, so perhaps we should do it at night too. Of course', Ian conceded, as he surveyed the rather anxious faces around him, 'we wouldn't have to do it barefoot!'

And so a group of 18 walkers – myself and my daughter Lydia among them – set off at 5 o'clock on a fine July evening to walk the 28 miles to Bala; and the first six miles were fun, and so were the second; and by the third it was starting to get dark; and by the fourth it was starting to get painful; and the last 4 miles were very painful indeed, as Lydia and I weren't absolutely sure what was bothering us more, our heads or shoulders, knees or toes, knees or toes. Speaking for myself, the whole of the lower part of my body seemed to be in a state of shock.

But we did it – together we wheezed and limped and hobbled into Bala at 7 o'clock in the morning, raising a five-figure sum in the process. And later that day, after a hearty breakfast and a service by the lakeside, Lydia and I returned home battered and aching, but also fulfilled and happy.

And what that experience taught me, above all else, was how many of the limitations we place on ourselves are here in the mind. Up to that point I'd considered 6 miles as a reasonable walk, and 9 miles as a long walk, and 14 miles as a very long walk; while in reality 28 miles was challenging but not impossible. The same thought came to me later that summer when our son Joe – who's not much of a cyclist, but is always up for a challenge – joined a bunch of friends in cycling from Birmingham to Paris; or when my mother-in-law Hazel – who has Parkinson's and had become anxious even about walking to the local shops – joined us for our family holiday in August, and discovered she could walk far better than she thought, covering a couple of miles or more on some rugged mountain tracks.

By nature I guess many of us are cautious beings. We keep our heads down. We live well within our capabilities. We play it safe. But what if we started thinking a little differently? What if we determined not just to live an ordinary life, but an extraordinary life? What if our Christian journey took us 28 miles not just 14; a couple of miles up a mountain track, not just a slow and anxious shuffle to the local shops? What if we made it our aim – with the remaining years that God gives us here on earth – to be as fruitful for him as is humanly possible?

That was the challenge, of course, that Jesus threw out to Andrew and Simon and James and John when he called on them to 'Follow me' – a challenge to move from the ordinary to the extraordinary, from fishing fish to drawing men, women, young people and children into the life-giving net of God's love. That was the challenge that transformed flaky Simon into Peter the Rock – 'and on this rock I will build my Church'. That was the challenge that Jesus brought to the crowds gathered round him to hear the Sermon on the Mount – a challenge not simply to strive for success and money and possessions and material comfort as our first ambition – not just to do the ordinary thing - but to strive instead for humility and righteousness and purity and peace-making and courage in the face of suffering. This was the challenge that St. Paul held out to the church in Rome as he reminded them that they were, quote, 'called to be saints'.

And yet – and yet – our minds tell us that such a journey isn't possible for us: that the life of faith, as expressed in the Beatitudes, our Gospel reading for today – the 28-mile walk – is quite beyond our capabilities. 'I'm just an ordinary person', we say, 'living an ordinary life, worshipping in an ordinary church, and most of the time at least, I'd like to keep it that way, thank you very much'. Occasionally we may meet someone else living life rather differently, someone who's following Christ more closely than we are; but even then, we have our defences at the ready. Either we ridicule them – 'that Jim, he's a bit of a fanatic', we say; or else we put them on a pedestal: 'that Glennys is a real saint'. The one thing we're reluctant to do, all too often, is to allow ourselves to be challenged, to shift our own spiritual aspirations from the ordinary to the extraordinary.

And there's something about today and tomorrow - All Saints Day followed by All Souls Day – that tells us that that's not quite good enough: that it's not enough either to ridicule or even to celebrate the lives of particular heroes and heroines of the faith, while keeping our own horizons as safe and comfortable as this peculiar time allows. The word 'saint' in the singular, as you may know, never appears in the Bible, not once – we never read of St Peter or St. Paul, St Mary or St. Martha. But the word 'saints' in the plural occurs nearly a hundred times; and there's a very good reason for that. Because the Church isn't called to buy into a kind of spiritual celebrity culture, with the Church Times as our equivalent of 'Hello' magazine: that's not what we're about at all. We're about everyone – every individual follower of Christ – responding to the call to be saints together, to live lives that are extraordinary, as spiritually fruitful as they possibly can be.

So why do we shy away from this calling? Why do we find it so hard to look at ourselves and those around us within the Church family, and say, 'We're all saints'?

It's partly, of course, because we're very aware of our own frailties and failings, and to call ourselves 'saints' seems arrogant in the extreme. But it's also perhaps that the outside world's image of sanctity is often a pretty unattractive one - self-righteous, perhaps, narrow, bigoted, judgemental, mean-spirited, 'holier-than-thou'. And if that's what being saints is about, we say, I don't want anything to do with it, thanks very much.

Yet contrast that false, distorted view of holiness with the full-blooded teaching of the Beatitudes, and here's something infinitely more attractive. Not easier, of course: no-one who reads the Beatitudes could accuse them of that – but fuller, richer, better.

False sanctity is self-righteous, self-satisfied, proud: but Jesus says, 'Blessed are the poor in spirit... blessed are the meek'.

False sanctity is cold, detached, bloodless: but Jesus says: 'Blessed are those who mourn... Blessed are those who hunger and thirst for righteousness'.

False sanctity is narrow, judgemental, bigoted: but Jesus says, 'Blessed are the merciful... blessed are the peacemakers'.

False sanctity concentrates on appearances, on outward show rather than inner integrity: but Jesus says, 'Blessed are the pure *in heart*'.

False sanctity is cowardly, not mixing with the world outside for fear of getting hurt: but Jesus says: 'Blessed are those who are persecuted'.

Here, in other words, is a humble, courageous, loving spirituality, to which all of us should aspire: a spirituality which is deeply attractive in this age as in every age. Here is a spirituality marked by integrity – and by a willingness to embrace personal sacrifice, so as to bring God's grace to a needy world.

And how vital is the faith of all of those 'called to be saints', as the long walk through this Coronavirus night continues to call on all the reserves of hope, compassion, imagination, courage and endurance to which the Beatitudes point us. How we need every member of the Body of Christ – the pastors, teachers, intercessors, evangelists, musicians, carers, good neighbours, computer technicians, administrators, the lot – all saints – to be praying for fresh strength and inspiration at this particular stage of the journey.

That's not easy, of course, the shift from the ordinary to the extraordinary; and individually our efforts may seem far from heroic, and really rather small. But as we regain this vision of 'all saints' – of the whole Body of Christ motivated by the empowering Spirit of Christ – so our little individual efforts become part of something far bigger, part in fact of salvation history, God's great plan for the world He loves so much.

But why the night at all? Why the Coronavirus journey in the first place? I can't answer that question, and nor can you. But what we *can* do is to pray that God might use this time to make His Church *more* extraordinary, to draw us closer into the very heart of the Beatitudes, of the Jesus-shaped life. Perhaps as so often, C.S. Lewis puts it best of all:

*'Imagine yourself as a living house', he writes. 'God comes in to rebuild that house. At first, perhaps, you can understand what He is doing. He is getting the drains right and stopping the leaks in the roof and so on; you knew that those jobs needed doing and so you are not surprised. But presently He starts knocking the house about in a way that hurts abominably and does not seem to make any sense. What on earth is He up to? The explanation is that He is building quite a different house from the one you thought of - throwing out a new wing here, putting on an extra floor there, running up towers, making courtyards. You thought you were being made into a decent little cottage: but He is building a palace. He intends to come and live in it Himself.'*

Shall we pray?

And a prayer from Bianco of Siena (and do join in if you know it): Sing:

*Come down, O Love divine,  
Seek thou this soul of mine,  
And visit it with thine own ardour glowing;  
O Comforter, draw near,  
Within my heart appear,  
And kindle it, thy holy flame bestowing.*