

May these words be pleasing.

In a year when conditions are right, and this year is such a year, barn owls prosper in the dale. One adult male, on windless dark nights, waits on a post a few miles this side of Reeth. On seeing the bike it flies from its post into the beam coming from the front light and it glides silently, steadfastly, within-the-beam, 5 metres (?), sometimes more, sometimes less, a couple of metres ahead, travelling at the same speed, it's head peering forward into the night. There it stays, until a distant, approaching, car breaks this connection, and interrupts the silence. But on a quiet winter's night this can be 3, 4 even 5 minutes of being with this beautiful winged creature.

There is a flip side to this thin place. Beautiful though the owl undoubtedly is, woe to the verge-living-creatures disturbed by the bike, for the owl hunts its would-be tea illuminated by the light of the bike.

We have in our gospel the beautiful saying of Jesus, the Beatitudes, and these also have their flip sides.

We may know these sayings as part of the sermon-on-the-mountain and they form part of Jesus' early teaching; this the start of his ministry up in his homeland to the north of Israel. He has called a group of friends, his disciples, and they retreat up a mountain to try and get breathing space away from the crowds. If they did get a break it was fleeting as in our reading from Luke (this morning) they come down from the mountain. Here Jesus delivers what is sometimes called the sermon on the plain.

Last week, I think, was the first time I had ever re-used part of a sermon I had preached before. Gillian was at St Marys, Barnard Castle (as she is this morning), and I was at Startforth, less than 500m away, with the river Tees in between. I had never been to Startforth, and so reused a useful section relevant to the readings from a previous sermon elsewhere.

Evidently this was not a new thought: Jesus thought the Beatitudes so beautiful that *they* were worth repeating on this level place, this time to a great crowd of his disciples and a great multitude of people from all Judea, Jerusalem, and the coast of Tyre and Sidon.

Blessed are you who are poor, for yours is the kingdom of God. Blessed are you who are hungry now, for you will be filled. Blessed are you who weep now, for you will laugh. Blessed are you when people hate you, and when they exclude you, revile you, and defame you on account of the Son of Man. Rejoice on that day and leap for joy, for surely your reward is great in heaven.

I feel blest when I encounter the beauty of the barn owl but there is the flip side: woe to the hunted. There are *three* flip sides to the beautiful sayings of Jesus. The first is the *reality* of the poor, the hungry, those who weep, those who are hated; they are blessed for *theirs* is the kingdom of God. The second is the warning for those unbroken in spirit: woe to those who are content with their riches and their standing-in-life for they are far from the kingdom of God. The third flip side lies throughout the wider teachings of Jesus in the sermon-on-the-mount or the teachings-on-the-plain.

You like me will never have seen a lead balloon. These wider teachings of Jesus will have gone down like a lead balloon (and continue to do so). We rightly condemn murder, but what about, says Jesus, when we persist in anger or resentment? We are guilty. We rightly condemn adultery, but what about, says Jesus, even the smallest thought of lust. We are guilty. We rightly wish that everyone would love their neighbour but when we cannot or will not love our enemies then we have failed. I remember hearing a sermon in Dundee within which was this rather bold statement: “There’s not a man in this church who hasn’t committed adultery.” Think again of that lead balloon.....

On a dark evening about this time of year in 1984 I was sitting on my bed. I was *suddenly* aware, for the first time, of the reality of God. I still have a crystal clear memory of four successive realities coming very quickly. The first was the reality of the living God, the second of the loving God who was, is and will be completely mindful of me, the third - I was a long way from the standards set by my God, as indeed was my family, my church and my world – that's a crucial message within the sermon-on-the-mountain and the teachings-on-the-plain; we are long way from the standards set by the living God. The fourth is that living with this loving God is not something to be explored alone. The beginning of the prayer of Jesus given within this sermon of Jesus is not *my* Father, but *our* Father. We are blest with God and with each other.

Faced with the reality of God and the reality of sin the reaction of Simon Peter in last week's gospel seems very understandable: he fell down at the knees of Jesus, saying, 'Go away from me, Lord, for I am a sinful man!' How good, then, to hear, in tonight's evensong, the familiar words, 'a broken and contrite heart, O Lord, thou wilt not despise.' Likewise we are blessed, we are on the right path, if we come before our God feeling poor in spirit, mourning our failings, humble and meek, with hunger and thirst for righteousness, merciful to others and ourselves, seeking a pure heart and seeking peace within our world and within our souls. The world may reject you but Jesus says, very truly, you are close to the Kingdom of God.