All Saints/Beatitudes Sermon

When I began at theology college I took part in a matriculation ceremony, for those of you who are unfamiliar with that term, as I was until I expected it, it is a tradition whenever new student of a university are officially inducted, writing their names on the official roll – marking their formal entry into their studies. What follows, at least at Durham University, is a bit less formal.

As the new student sleave the chapel, they are met with staff and continuing students bashing pots and pan, cheering and singing. What might be even more unique given I was entering theology college, during this celebration someone started singing When the Saints Go Marching In.

It was almost impossible not to join in, its just one of those songs that is infectious. When you hear the tune, you can't help but sing those family words, words many of us have known since we were children.

As I was preparing for today that familiar tune popped into my head and I was reminded of this memory. But I also started wondering – where did this song come from? I realised that despite the song being so recognisable I actually knew very little about it.

When the saints go marching in has its origins in African American spirituals, a music genre created by enslaved Africans in the American south. We owe this joyful song to those experiencing some of the worst hardships we can imagine. People who have often been ignored, their histories erased and their contributions left uncelebrated. The exact kinds of people Jesus blesses in today's gospel reading.

I think the beatitudes, the series of blessings Jesus proclaims during the sermon on the mount, is one of the most powerful passages in the gospels. Jesus does not lift up those whom we might expect – he does not say; "Blessed are the healthy, the successful, the confident, the people who have everything together." He does not say "blessed are the most impressive, the most powerful, the never-down-trodden", no, instead Jesus does what he always odes, and praises those the world does not favour – the poor, the meek, the mourning, the peaceful.

It seems to me that the sermon on the mount is all about Jesus' seemingly lavish blessing of the world around him especially that which society doesn't seem to have much time for, people in pain, people who work for peace instead of profit, people who exercise mercy instead of vengeance, people like those who first sang when the saints amidst their suffering.

And are we surprised that a God who would enter out world in the most vulnerable form of a newborn baby, would be in business of championing the vulnerable and overlooked? In his life, Jesus says to us You may admire strength and might, but I am blessing all human weakness. You may seek power, but I am blessing all human vulnerability. This Jesus whom we follow cried at the tomb of his friend and turned the other cheek and forgave those who hung him on a cross.

I wonder the kind of beatitudes Jesus might speak over us today if he delivered his sermon on the mount again. What would God made flesh who blesses the weak in a world that only admires the strong have to say to us and out society. Perhaps something like this:

Blessed are the poor in spirit, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven. Blessed are the tiered. Blessed are the willing. Blessed are those who have nothing to offer. Blessed are they for whom nothing seems to be working. Blessed are the overworked and underpaid. Blessed are the retired who give their time to others. Blessed are the friends who pray. Blessed are the faithful who continue to worship in dangerous places.

Blessed are those who mourn, for they will be comforted. Blessed are they who have buried their loved ones, for whom tears are real and fresh. Blessed are they who have loved enough to know what loss feels like. Blessed are the mothers of the miscarried. Blessed are they who don't have the luxury of taking things for granted any more. Blessed are they who can't fall apart because they have to keep it together for everyone else. Blessed are the motherless, the alone, the ones from whom so much has been taken. Blessed are they who laughed again when for so long they thought they never would.

“Blessed are the meek, for they will inherit the earth. Blessed are those who no one else notices. The children with no one to talk to. The homeless man and the person who shows him kindness. The hospital cleaners. The night-shift workers. Blessed are the forgotten. Blessed are the unemployed, the unimpressive, the underrepresented.

“Blessed are those who hunger and thirst for righteousness, for they will be filled. Blessed are the wrongly accused, the ones who never catch a break, the ones for whom life is hard – for they are those with whom Jesus chose to surround himself. Blessed are the refugees. Blessed are the ones without support. Blessed are the foster carers, metal health nurses and foodbank volunteers. Blessed are those who hunger and thirst for righteousness.

“Blessed are the merciful, for they will receive mercy. Blessed are those who make terrible business decisions for the sake of people. Blessed are the social workers and teachers. Blessed are the those who step between the powerful and the weak. Blessed are they who refuse to give into to the world’s cruelty. Blessed are those who chose peace and non-violence even at great cost. Blessed are those who forgive. Blessed is everyone who has ever forgiven me when I didn’t deserve it. Blessed are the merciful.

Blessed are all the unnamed, uncelebrated saints, who continue the kingdom work with no need for thanks.

Amen.