



**The Rector's Charge to Vestry  
Sunday 1 February 2026  
The Fourth Sunday after Epiphany, Year A**

*What does the Lord require of you  
but to do justice, and to love kindness  
and to walk humbly with your God?  
--Micah 6:8*

God of wisdom and power, grant me the grace to speak the truth from my heart and have no guile upon my tongue, that my words may serve to build up your people and bring glory to your name, through Jesus, who is your living Word. Amen.

There are the verses of Scripture that many people know and can recite; or at least say, "Hey, I've heard that before" when a passage is read in the liturgy. And then there are the verses that captivate readers or hearers so much that they are memorialised in things that are more lasting than memory. There are two such passages in today's readings that I think fall into the latter category. The first is the last verse of the Old Testament reading, Micah 6:8: "what does the Lord require of you but to do justice, and to love kindness, and to walk humbly with your God?" It is the subject of all kinds of musical arrangements, one of which we heard in the preludes before the service and another which is the anthem after Communion, and is often found printed on cards, bookmarks, posters, and, as I saw two weeks ago, on the T-shirt of a parishioner from Christ Church, Campbellford. The second reading is the Gospel for today, the Beatitudes, which form part of Jesus's Sermon on the Mount, a summation of his teaching from early in his ministry. These twelve verses are often treated in the same ways as the Micah verse, and some of them are popular subjects of stained glass windows. If you look around our church, you'll see that not one, but two, of the windows depict verses from the Beatitudes.

There are two versions of the Beatitudes: the one we heard just now, from the Sermon on the Mount in Matthew's gospel; and a similar but blunter version called Blessings and Woes in the Sermon on the Plain in Luke's gospel. Matthew's version is sometimes accused of diluting the directness of Jesus' message. Where Luke records, "Blessed are the poor", Matthew writes, "Blessed are the poor in spirit." One might argue that poor in spirit could encompass a larger number of people than just poor, but I think the real difference between the two gospels is the audience: in Matthew's case, he is writing for people who may not have been financially poor, but were in a time of tension, and in some cases, persecution. They were poor in spirit if not in pocket. Being so far removed from that first audience of Matthew's gospel, and generally not experiencing the same level of conflict in society because of the faith to which we adhere, I suspect most of us hear Matthew's version slightly more favourably. Luke names that Jesus has a preferential option for the poor. Matthew's version allows space that helps to make the message more palatable by giving people who are not poor an out: "well, I may have privilege, but I'm poor in spirit". As a post I shared on social media the other day said, "Let's be real. When people say, 'Stop being so political,' what they're really saying is, 'The system works for me, and you're ruining my comfort by pointing out it's built on someone else's oppression.'" This may be one of the reasons we tend to remember Matthew's Beatitudes more than we remember Luke's Blessings and

Woes: they don't convict us in the same way.

And yet, as Charles James Cook wrote in his essay on the passage in the commentary *Feasting on the Word*, "whenever we hear the Beatitudes, we are struck with their poetic beauty and, at the same time, overwhelmed by their perceived impracticality for the world in which we live. We admire the instruction, but we fear the implications of putting the words into actual practice. We live in a time when the blessings given are to those who succeed, often at the expense of others. To be poor in spirit, peaceful, merciful, and meek will get you nowhere in a culture grounded in competition and fear. Perhaps this is why most references to the Beatitudes imply that in giving this instruction, Jesus was literally turning the values of the world upside down. Who can survive in attempting to live into the spirit of the Beatitudes?"

"The answer resides not in their impracticality but in their practicality. We often approach them as an impossible challenge for ordinary living. Only the greatest of saints are up to the tasks....In the meantime, the world does not get any better, and we remain unfulfilled in our pale expressions of Christian discipleship. The truth is that Jesus meant the Beatitudes to be for everyone. How can such a task be accomplished in our own time?"<sup>i</sup>

I wonder if this is actually the right question to ask. It assumes that the Beatitudes are a kind of checklist for disciples: if we just do these things or act in these ways, then we will be blessed. This lens on the sayings of Jesus seems to me to be rather transactional and leads to the kind of thing you see in short videos on social media where flamboyantly Christian people exclaim with transparently false humility, "Oh, I'm just so blessed."

The words of Ronald J. Allen, a Professor of the New Testament, resonate with me.

He suggests that we should be encouraged to "hear the Beatitudes in the indicative mood rather than the imperative. The Beatitudes are not direct calls to action, to become poor in spirit, to mourn, to be meek, and so forth. Rather, [they] are promises. Indirectly, of course, the Beatitudes do imply that people who have responded positively to the coming of the realm will manifest the values and behaviours that are exemplified in them."<sup>ii</sup> The practice of faithfully following Jesus and proclaiming the gospel will develop the characteristics of the Beatitudes in the practitioner, and blessedness will follow. Going deeper, Allen argues that Matthew's gospel makes a distinction between the "present evil era that God will soon end, and the coming realm when all things will take place according to God's purposes of love and justice. God will bring about the final transition from the old age to the new by the second coming of Jesus....This context is key for understanding the first word of each Beatitude: "Blessed." To be blessed is not simply to be happy [or fortunate] but to know that one is included in the coming realm. This notion was important to the Matthean congregation, because they faced both external and internal problems:"<sup>iii</sup> tensions around who they were as Jews who followed Jesus. Allen suggests that Matthew's presentation of the Beatitudes is an assurance that, while life may be difficult now, those who faithfully endure can look forward to the realm of God.

And so, if the first take on the Beatitudes I mentioned might make it seem as though they are impossible instructions for those who would follow Jesus, this latter perspective suggests to us that those who see themselves reflected in the Beatitudes should have courage to persevere. And, if this was true for the early community of Christians that gathered around Matthew, it is no less true for us, especially as we live in these times where there is a great deal of tension between the gospel and the culture that surrounds us.

Here is one example of how we might find encouragement in the Beatitudes in our own times. We tend to hear them as specific individual descriptions but the ancient understanding carried more theological muscle. So, we tend to hear "Blessed are those who mourn" as a word of consolation to those grieving the death of a loved one. "By contrast, Matthew has in mind the mourning of the faithful who recognize that the present condition of the world is far from God's purposes. They see idolatry, injustice, exploitation, and violence, and they mourn. This beatitude promises that 'they will be comforted', that is, they will see the realm come."<sup>iv</sup>

I love this reminder of the original context of the Beatitudes. Staying with the one I just mentioned, this expanded understanding of what mourning means, more than just grief at a time of death, gives me a different perspective on what I see going on in the world around me today. I feel like these ancient words speak more powerfully to my spirit as I take in what's going on.

The disintegration of the United States in so many ways: blatant corruption, weaponisation of justice, unfettered violence, bullying inside and outside their borders. Ongoing conflicts around the world: the war in Ukraine, the destruction of Gaza and genocide of Palestinian people, unrest in the Congo, Haiti, Yemen, Syria, Afghanistan, Myanmar; civil war and famine in Sudan. A blind faith that strengthening the economy at any cost will fix all our woes, regardless of environmental considerations or Indigenous treaty rights. The groaning of the earth after years of human exploitation and carelessness. Poverty, natural disaster, the rise of hatred and violence towards women, queer people, Jews and Muslims in majority white nations, immigrants and refugees, poor people, and even just people who disagree with us. When I think about just a few of these things my heart feels heavy. If I think about too many of them at one time, it begins to feel like my soul is being

crushed. Thinking about the Beatitudes in the way I described a moment ago gives me language for what I feel. It's mourning. It's grief.

And, thinking about the Beatitudes this way also gives me a renewed sense of hope that God is working at restoring the world to the ideal for which it was created, that the realm, or reign, or kingdom, or commonwealth of God—whatever language we use—is, even now, on the way. The responses with which we began our worship this morning reflect this way of looking forward with hope: "O God, who called all life into being, the earth, sea, and sky are yours. Your presence is all around us; your love fills every living thing. Your Spirit enlivens all who walk the earth. With her we yearn for justice to be done, for creation to be free from threat, for the hungry to be fed, for captives to be released, for your kingdom of peace to come on earth."<sup>v</sup>

In a few minutes, we will also be invited to profess an affirmation of faith that we have not used before, but which, I think, reflects this expansive view of the promise that God is going to bless us—and by that I mean not just you and me as individuals but the whole creation. We're going to be blessed by being included in the coming realm of God.

As a follower of Jesus, even though I still mourn, even though I still grieve, I feel less helpless when I rest in the hope of a God who will bring justice to the earth. Without this hope, it would be easy to feel paralysed, unable to do anything, too small and insignificant to make a difference. But our faith gives us the language to understand the hope we are given, the call that has been laid upon us.

St Paul wrote to the Corinthians, "Consider your own call, brothers and sisters: not many of you were wise by human standards, not many were powerful, not many were of noble birth.

But God chose what is foolish in the world to shame the wise; God chose what is weak in the world to shame the strong; God chose what is low and despised in the world, things that are not, to reduce to nothing things that are" (1 Corinthians 1:26-28). To me, this is a powerful reminder that, as insignificant as I may think I am, I am not alone in the world; and as powerful and mighty as the bullies and tyrants of the world may seem, they are not more powerful than God. As St Paul would go on in the same letter to the Corinthians, "For just as the body is one and has many members, and all the members of the body, though many, are one body, so it is with Christ. For in the one Spirit we were all baptized into one body—Jews or Greeks, slaves or free—and we were all made to drink of one Spirit.... Now you are the body of Christ and individually members of it" (1 Corinthians 12:12, 27). We are all members of the Body of Christ, and together, no matter how foolish, or weak, or low we may feel, we have been called by God through Jesus Christ to become his Body in the world. And the Body of Christ in the world is the means by which the realm of God begins to unfold in the world.

The Body of Christ is, of course, all Christians baptised into the fellowship of Christ's Church. But this is Vestry Sunday and I can't just leave this reflection at the sort of abstract level that I've been talking about. As I've been treading the parallel paths of what to preach as today's sermon on the readings and what to say about vision for our ministry this year, the confluence of the readings from Micah and Matthew is hard to ignore. In the current geopolitical climate, the focus on the justice of the reign of God is a powerful antidote to the despair that could be a very real response to the intersecting crises of war, imperialism, patriarchy, environmental disaster, and human folly. So, as a church celebrating our 200th anniversary and a congregation beginning a new year of ministry, what role might we play in God's mission?

I think the very fact that we are celebrating the bicentenary of St John's is a testament to the faithful witness of generations of Christians who have worshipped in this place and, nourished by Word and Sacrament, have gone out into the world to serve. From the earliest days of the parish, when the first Rector of Peterborough, Samuel Armour, a teacher and priest, ministered to the soldiers and settlers of the area; to the congregation's response to the catastrophic Quaker Oats fire in December 1916; to our recent operation of One Roof Community Centre, St John's has been not only a symbol of stability standing here on our hill, but has also been a community of compassionate Christians inspired to serve the needs of our neighbours. As I will mention in a few moments, we are going to go through a mission action planning process this year so we can faithfully discern where God is calling us in this generation of the parish.

I know that I am not the only person who feels a sense of grief at the enormity of what we see in the world around us. I have commented to several people that the community of faith should be a place where we bring not only our joys but also our sorrows. If what I said about the Beatitudes is correct, then the ancient tradition of the church, which is sometimes lost because we are so far removed from it, is that, in the compassion that we have learned from Jesus, we are called to mourn when the world does not reflect the desire of God. As I have attempted to show in our worship this morning, we have the language and the liturgy to address both the sorrow and the need we see in the world.

While I do not wish to pre-empt the work of the Mission Action Planning process, I do want to articulate a few things that I see as ways that we here at St John's can offer to ourselves and to the community opportunities to acknowledge, confront, and take action on the places where the

world does not conform to the values and practices of the blessed kingdom of God.

First: the Mission Action Planning process that we will undertake this year, and about which I will say more in the meeting that follows our worship this morning. This strategic planning exercise will ask us to reflect on where we've been, where we are now, and where we think God might be calling us to be. We will ask questions of ourselves and of our neighbours that will seek to discover what needs exist in our community and how the people of St John's, either as ourselves, or preferably in partnership with like-minded partners in ministry and service, might begin to meet them. We have been using the same vision and mission for almost two decades and, in a time that is very different not only from twenty years ago but even five years ago, this exercise will help us to survey the lay of the land around us and develop a renewed sense of purpose. It is my hope that, whenever the steering group engages with parishioners for feedback that everyone will contribute as they can.

Now, some more specific things that are already seeds of the work that I think we may be called to in this season of St John's history. We are called to celebrate inspiring worship that aligns us with the God whom we praise. The variety of worship that St John's offers means that there should be something that speaks to anyone who comes to this place to worship even though, ultimately, worship is not about making us feel good—it is gathering with the community of believers so that, in the words of the Exhortation in the morning and evening offices of the *Book of Common Prayer*, “when we assemble and meet together [we] render thanks for the great benefits that we have received at [God's] hands, to set forth [God's] most worthy praise, to hear [God's] most holy Word, and to ask those things which are requisite and necessary, as well for the body as the soul.”

In addition to the already well-established pattern of worship of Sundays, Wednesdays, and Holy Days, we have two relatively new expressions of worship that offer something different. The first, established in November 2024, is the Coventry Cathedral Litany of Reconciliation,<sup>vi</sup> said each Wednesday at noon in the Tower Door vestibule. The Litany, which I introduced several years ago, is the fruit of the one-time Dean of Coventry, who penned it in the aftermath of the bombing of the cathedral by the Luftwaffe in the Second World War. Each week, after reciting the Litany, we take time to offer our own petitions for those we know and those we don't; for the sick, the suffering, the unhoused. The prayers are different each week but what is unchanging is the compassion that those who gather have for the world in which we live. While we may mourn at times, we also know that we are blessed to be in this community of prayer. Following the intercessions, we recite one of the prayers for peace that members of the group have found and supplied. We conclude with the Lord's Prayer and then sing, “Let my prayer rise up like incense before you, the lifting up of my hands as an offering to you.”

While this is a small group that has faithfully gathered without interruption since we began to say the Litany, the very act of taking a few minutes mid-week to stop and to stand on the front steps of the church, both looking out over neighbouring people and buildings in the downtown and also being visible to anyone passing by the front of the church, as we pray for peace and reconciliation, is a powerful witness.

Even newer than the Coventry Litany is the Contemplative Eucharist that began in November. Celebrated at 4:00 p.m. on the third Sunday of each month in the Guild Hall, this Eucharist is both old and new. It is the revival of the Taizé liturgies that used to take place on Sunday evenings a decade ago, but focussing less on the musical

expression and more on providing an opportunity to gather for a quiet and reflective service. Participants are invited to bring their hopes and concerns, to lay them before God in worship, and to receive sustenance both spiritual in making their Communion and physical in the simple dinner that follows. In my mind, this new worship offering is a manifestation of the Beatitudes that we are focussing on today: a call towards being meek, being peacemakers, being hungry for justice, and entering into the blessing of God as we strive to follow the path of Jesus.

Another thing that was new this past year which I think fits the theme I'm exploring today is the Creation Care group. On the Second Sunday of Easter, we observed Earth Sunday, and Karen Turner led a workshop after church that day called, "What if the Church took the Climate Crisis Seriously?" We discussed the place of creation in our theology and the role that followers of Jesus have in caring for the planet that God gave us as our home. Coming out of the workshop was a desire to continue to gather for learning and advocacy and a small group of people concerned about the environment and the role of human beings in creating the climate crisis and now addressing it was formed. The Creation Care group meets on a regular basis and they are responsible for the collection bins that are in the narthex for used writing instruments, egg cartons, batteries, printer cartridges, etc. They have been discussing opportunities for education and advocacy and I see their work as an important part of our shared ministry. It is a tangible response to the fifth Mark of Mission of the Anglican Communion, "To strive to safeguard the integrity of creation and sustain and renew the life of the earth"<sup>vii</sup>, which is the source of the sixth promise of the Baptismal Covenant. We dipped our toes into a relatively new observance in the Anglican Church of Canada this past year: from 1st September to 4th October, churches from many denominations around the world

observe the Season of Creation. We will work towards a more deliberate inclusion of the season in our worship this fall.

The final existing ministry of St John's that I think both helps us to live into the Beatitudes and which is also a priority for us in our ongoing formation of new disciples is the First Friday All-Ages Ministry. Begun in Advent 2023, All-Ages gatherings took place five times in 2024 and then became monthly gatherings in 2025. Focussing on intergenerational ministry, to people of all ages, rather than ministry to specific age cohorts, the All-Ages Ministry seeks to respond to the changing patterns of church attendance and familiarity that we see. Many families are either busy or choose to have family quiet time on Sundays these days, so the Friday evening schedule of our All-Ages gatherings comes at a transition time between the school/work week and the weekend. And, since we provide a meal, it takes some of the stress off busy parents at the end of the week. The All-Ages model is evolving as we get more experience and it is my hope that the day will come where coming to worship on Friday evening is every bit as normative for participants in that ministry as coming to worship on Sunday morning is normative for those of us with a more traditional formation in the church.

I could not finish my list of things that I invite us to focus on this year without mentioning the lack of an ongoing and more formal community ministry. When One Roof Community Centre closed at the end of November 2023, it was my hope that we would take a year off to rest and recover and then try to figure out what community ministry or outreach we might be called to next. It has now been two years, and while an intensive ministry of meal provision and operation of a daytime shelter with access to many social services and programs is likely not to be our vocation again, there is still much need in the city. It is my hope, as I said previously,

that the Mission Action Planning Process that we will go through will help us to identify some of the needs and how we might work to meet them.

This is not an exhaustive list of everything that takes place here. If you've read the vestry reports you know that there is a lot that happens in this building and beyond that forms our shared life and ministry. These few things that I have focused on today are things that I want to ensure the wider congregation is aware of, and to invite us all to consider how we might support them. Each one is also, in my view, an expression of the kind of work that we are called to do as Christians, summed up nicely in those familiar words from Micah that we heard in the first reading: "what does the Lord require of you but to do justice, and to love kindness, and to walk humbly with your God?"

And, in these times, when the world is a degree or two from irreversible environmental catastrophe and where it's clear that a new order is being ushered in, causing those who benefit from the old order to rely on violence and oppression to hold on, what a high calling it is for those

of us who follow Jesus to offer to the world a message of hope, a message of peace, a message of justice, a message of love. What a gift we have in this parish, a light on the hill for 200 years, to be a people of blessing. As we have been blessed, let us bless others.

In summary, as we reflect on the words of Scripture that we have heard today; as we discern who, what, and where God is calling St John's to be going into our third century of ministries of worship, service, and fellowship; as we give thanks for being a part of the blessed community of the faithful; and as we recommit ourselves to be people who pursue humility, peace, and justice in the face of the suffering of the world, I leave you with the words of William Whitla, a parishioner of Holy Trinity Anglican Church, Toronto. They were written in 1989 as a response to the events in Tiananmen Square, in Beijing, China; and dedicated to the mothers of the disappeared (in Argentina), the author's home community of Holy Trinity in Toronto, and the people of Tiananmen Square. It is a hymn with four verses, although only three appear in our hymn book, at number 575:

"Let Streams of Living Justice Flow"  
by William Whitla (©1989)

Let streams of living justice flow down upon the earth;  
give freedom's light to captives, let all the poor have worth.  
The hungry's hands are pleading, the workers claim their rights,  
the mourners long for laughter, the blinded seek for sight.  
Make liberty a beacon, strike down the iron power,  
abolish ancient vengeance: proclaim your people's hour.

The dreaded disappearance of family and friend;  
the torture and the silence: the fear that knows no end;  
the mother with her candle, the child who holds a gun,  
the old one nursing hatred; all seek release to come.  
Each candle burns for freedom; each lights a tyrant's fall;  
each flower placed for martyrs gives tongue to silenced call.

For healing of the nations, for peace that will not end,  
for love that makes us lovers, God grant us grace to mend.  
Weave our varied gifts together; knit our lives as they are spun;  
on your loom of time enroll us till our thread of life is run.  
O great Weaver of our fabric, bind Church and world in one;  
dye our texture with your radiance, light our colours with your sun.

Your city's built to music; we are the stones you seek;  
your harmony is language; we are the words you speak.  
Our faith we find in service, our hope in other's dreams,  
our love in hand of neighbour; our homeland brightly gleams.  
Inscribe our hearts with justice; your way, the path untried;  
your truth, the heart of stranger; your life the Crucified.

*END*

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<sup>i</sup> Charles James Cook, "Matthew 5:1-12 Pastoral Perspective" in David L. Bartlett and Barbara Brown Taylor, eds., *Feasting on the Word: Preaching on the Revised Common Lectionary*, Year A, Volume 1 (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 2010), p. 308.

<sup>ii</sup> Ronald J. Allen, "Matthew 5:1-12 Homiletical Perspective" in David L. Bartlett and Barbara Brown Taylor, eds., *Feasting on the Word: Preaching on the Revised Common Lectionary*, Year A, Volume 1 (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 2010), p. 311.

<sup>iii</sup> Ibid.

<sup>iv</sup> Ibid.

<sup>v</sup> "A Service of Prayer for Justice and Peace", in *Iona Abbey Worship Book* (Glasgow, Scotland: Wild Goose Publications/The Iona Community, 2001).

<sup>vi</sup> <https://www.coventrycathedral.org.uk/reconciliation/reconciliation-ministry/litany-of-reconciliation>

<sup>vii</sup> <https://www.anglican.ca/resources/marks-of-mission/>