

## **MATT 5.4: HAPPY ARE THOSE WHO MOURN**

*[Chelmsford, Sunday morning 30 October 2011 – Thank God for loved ones]*

In my first church there was an old man who always, the moment I began to preach, closed his eyes and went to sleep. Church for him must have been a deeply therapeutic experience. But when Jesus preached, nobody nodded off. He was quite literally a ‘shocking’ preacher. Time and again he must have startled the living daylights out of people.

Take my text this morning. “**Happy are those who mourn**”. Is that no a shocking statement? It gets no better in other translations. In Eugene Peterson’s translation we find, “*You are blessed when you feel you’ve lost what is most dear to you*” – Similarly JB Philips: “*Happy are those who know what sorrow means*”. How can that be?

Imagine meeting a friend, whose face is covered with a huge smile: “*Hello there*”, he says. “*You’ll be delighted to know that my wife died yesterday. Come along to the funeral next week and have a really wonderful time!*”.

What utter nonsense. Death is not an enjoyable experience – and certainly not for those of us who have looked on. For those of us who have truly loved, death is a very painful experience. We mourn with real tears the one who has left us.

But I’ve not been fair to my text.

Jesus did not just say “**Happy are those who mourn**”.

He went on to say “**God will comfort them**”.

The happiness of which Jesus speaks is not the happiness of those who mourn – rather it is the happiness of those who are comforted. Tears will not have the last word.

## **TEARS WILL NOT HAVE THE LAST WORD**

Luke tells us that when Jesus preached his first sermon at the synagogue in Nazareth (see Luke 4.16-19), he took as his text the words of Isaiah 61: “**The Sovereign Lord has filled me with his Spirit. He has chosen me and sent me to bring good news to the poor, to heal the broken hearted... He has sent me to comfort all who mourn, to give those who mourn in Zion joy and gladness instead of grief, a song of praise instead of sorrow**” (Isaiah 61. 1,3).

The primary focus of Isaiah may not have been on those who mourned for loved ones – but rather on those who mourned the parlous state in which the nation found itself, where the rich and the powerful got their way and the rights of the poor were trampled. ‘*Cheer up*’, he said, ‘*the God of justice is not asleep. One day he will comfort his people – one day he will put things right*’.

Whether or not this was the primary thrust of Jesus' beatitude, is open to debate. But one thing for sure, in this world of suffering, pain, and death, tears will not have the last word. One day God will comfort his people.

In the words of penultimate chapter of the Bible: **“God will wipe away all tears from their eyes. There will be no more death, no more grief or crying or pain. The old things have disappeared...I make all things new”** (Rev 21.4,5).

On this day when we remember friends and loved ones who have died, here is good news – here is true comfort – tears will not have the last word.

Don't get me wrong. I am not saying that there is no place for tears. There is a very real place for grief.

Not to cry, not to mourn, can actually be exceedingly unhealthy.

I have seen people become ill because they refused to grieve.

Catherine Marshall, who lost her minister-husband Peter, aged only 46, had some instructive words about not trying to hide our emotions: *“Trying to force oneself to be brave will not heal the heart. This is hard for men who are trained to believe that tears are the sign of weakness. But it is forever true that when the storms of life are savage, it is the tree that bends with the wind that survives. Tensing up, walling up the heart, damning up the tears, will inevitably mean trouble later on, perhaps years later. There is emotional release in letting the tears flow”*

But there are tears and there are tears. The Apostle Paul expressed it this way: he said to the church in Thessalonica, we do **“not grieve as others do who have no hope”** (1 Thess 4.13) Why? Because for Christians death is not the end.

In the words of Jesus with which I begin every funeral service: **“I am the resurrection and the life. Those who believe in me, even though they die, will live”** (Jn 11.25).

For those who have put their trust in the Lord Jesus there is hope.

This hope is not wishful thinking. Our hope is based on the resurrection of Jesus.

God, said the Apostle Peter, **“gave us new life by raising Jesus Christ from death. This fills us with a living hope”** (1 Pet 1.3)

The result is that when we mourn, as mourn we do, we not mourn so much for our loved ones, as for ourselves. The grief we experience, the tears we shed, are over the loss that is ours. But our loss is in fact their gain. They are in a far better place.

For them all struggles of life are over. To quote again John: **“God will wipe away all tears from their eyes”**. What an amazing picture. Like a mother, God Almighty himself tenderly, lovingly dries the tears.

John goes on: **“There will be no more death, no more grief or crying or pain”** (Rev 21.4) Attention has sometimes been drawn to the negative terms used here: no death, no grief, no crying, no pain.

But, it has been rightly said that the new world “*is more easily pictured in terms of what it replaces, than by attempting to describe what is now impossible to conceive*” (Mounce)  
As the Apostle Paul once said: “**What no one ever saw or heard, what no one ever thought could happen, is the very thing God prepared for those who love him**” (1 Cor 2.9 – quoting Is 64.4). It is beyond our conceiving.

And yet, one thing we do know from the Book of Revelation is that “*the new order will be a place for endless life, joy, celebration and love*” (Ben Witherington).  
What a wonderful hope is ours!

This morning on the basis of Rev 21 I want to make three further statements:

## 1. A NEW WORLD IS COMING

John, in exile on the island of Patmos, had a vision of a new city  
21.2: “**I saw the Holy City, the new Jerusalem**”

Ever since Jerusalem was destroyed by the Babylonians in the 6th century BC, the Jews had dreamed of a re-built Jerusalem. These dreams continued even after the physical re-building of Jerusalem at the end of the sixth century.

The new **holy city, the new Jerusalem**, was at the centre of Jewish hope.  
It is this concept of a city which John takes hold of and then adapts to the Christian hope.

For many people today cities are unattractive places, associated with pollution and overcrowding, as also with the breakdown of law and order.

People who have money and opportunity tend to flee the city.

They dream of retiring to the country, if not to the seaside.

It is interesting to look at the way in which people here in Essex have moved steadily out of London - first they moved from the East End to Romford, then on to Chelmsford, and then finally on to Frinton. The last thing most people want to do is to live in a city.

John, however, dreamt of a **city**, and a “**holy**” city at that.

A place of peace and of well-being, where nobody will be engaged in underhand or shameful behavior (21.26) – but rather where everybody will be engaged in the worship and service of God (22.3).

Yes, do notice that John's vision of the life to come was a place of community.

His idea of heaven was not a lonely desert island, nor was it some small village tucked away in the hills, but rather a mega-city, bursting with life & vitality.

He describes the population of this New Jerusalem as too large for any council official to count.  
Acc to Rev 7.9: “**no one could count all the people**”

John dreamt of a new inclusive community, a community composed not of a faithful few, but of all the nations of the world. There will be people there “**from every race, tribe, nation, and language**” (Rev 7.9).. In terms of our church, heaven will be like one constant international evening - what a wonderful thought!

## 2. THIS NEW WORLD IS OF GOD’S MAKING

21.2: **"I saw the Holy City, the New Jerusalem, coming down out of heaven from God"**.

It sounds like a piece of science-fiction.

But in fact John was seeking to make a theological statement.

The very descent of the new Jerusalem "**out of heaven from God**" is a pointer to the fact that this new world is of God's making, and is not the product of human effort

**"And now I make all things new"** declares the one who is seated on the throne (v5).

The Kingdom of God is not something we achieve, it is something which God brings about.

In the forecourt of a Moscow art gallery stands the statue of a workman beating a broad sword with a hammer. The bottom of the sword is assuming the shape of the ploughshare, and underneath is the inscription: "*We must bend our swords into ploughshares*".

The inscription is an echo of words found in Is 2.4 & Mic 4.3, but there is one salient difference between the Marxist hope and the Biblical hope.

Whereas Marxists believe that the future is ultimately in our hands, the OT prophets believed that men would beat their swords into ploughshares and their spears into pruning hooks on the day when God establishes his kingdom on earth – the future is in God’s hands!

If our hope is in ourselves, then we look forward in vain.

But the Christian hope is in God, God who has already acted decisively in his Son, Jesus Christ.

Our hope for the future is certain precisely because of what God has already achieved in the cross and resurrection of Jesus.

## 3. THIS NEW WORLD IS OPEN TO ALL

In this new Jerusalem all our dreams are met and all our longings are satisfied.

For now we find ourselves in the presence of God himself.

Many years ago Augustine declared: "*The heart is restless until it finds its rest in you*"

But now with God in our midst, all our yearnings after God are met.

Or as John puts it: **"To anyone who is thirsty I will give the right to drink from the spring of the water of life without paying for it.... I will be their God, and they will be my children"**

(Rev 21.6,7)

Notice the way in which this statement is made – it is more than a statement, it is an invitation to come and drink. Indeed, this invitation is made specific right at the end of the Book: “**Come, whoever is thirsty; accept the water of life as a gift, whoever wants it**” (Rev 22.17).

In other words, this new world is open to all.

God’s love is universal in its scope. None are outside the love of God.

But sadly, there is what a friend of mine called *‘the dark side of hope’* (Stephen Travis)

God passionately loves us each one of us, but he does not force himself upon us.

We have a choice: will we allow him to be our God?

Will we take advantage of his gift of life and so be part of the new world that is to come?

Or will we turn our backs upon him?

The fact is, as John states at the end of this chapter, “**Only those whose names are written in the Lamb’s book of the living will enter the city**” (21.27)

For those whose names are not written in the Lamb’s book, for those who have rejected God and his offer of life and love, “**the place for them is the lake burning with fire and sulphur, which is the second death**” (Rev 21.8).

OK John is using picture language – but one thing for certain: the alternative to God’s new world is dire!

Let’s be clear: God is no cosmic sadist. God wants the very best for us.

He loves us – he wants each one of us to enjoy his new heaven.

But precisely because he loves us, he allows us to choose.

As CS Lewis put it, Christianity presents us with *‘a God so full of mercy that he becomes man and dies by torture to avert that final ruin from his creatures, and who, yet, where that heroic remedy fails, seems unwilling, or even unable, to arrest the ruin by an act of power... And here is the real problem: so much mercy, and yet there is Hell’*.

Hell is a reality, but as Lewis went on to say: if the gates of hell are locked, they are locked from the inside

But let me not end on a negative one: there is a new world coming, of God’s own making, and in this new world all are welcome.

On this day, when many of us are conscious again of our loss, let us remind ourselves that our loss is their gain: “**Happy**”, said Jesus, “**are those who mourn, God will comfort them**”.

Our comfort is that our loved ones are safe in the hands of God.

Once we have entrusted our lives to his safekeeping, there is nothing in this world or the next which can separate us from his great love.