

Today's gospel reading – from the Sermon on the Mount – is about the values we live by; this is called 'the Beatitudes' because each phrase begins with the words: 'Blessed are...' The version of the Beatitudes in Matthew's gospel is much longer – here, Luke has only four and each one is followed by an opposite 'Woe to you...' or 'Alas for you...'

In both versions, the Beatitudes are a complete reversal of how things are in human society: an upside-down version of the way we've always known things. When we hear people say: "Yes, he was great man", they usually mean that he had pots of money, or a title, or that he was a well-known explorer, author, soldier, doctor or bishop – or even, these days, a 'celebrity.' Greatness seems to depend on reputation or fame or income or the status of the work a person does – that's the way we've always known it and this is what Jesus' teaching contradicts.

And the world returns the compliment. It pities the bereaved, but the Lord says: "Blessed are those who

mourn.” The world looks down on those who have little, but Jesus says: “Blessed are the poor.” The world spends billions on weapons of destruction, but Jesus says: “Blessed are the peacemakers.” The world prizes competition and aggression, but Jesus says: “Blessed are the gentle.” In fact, the *whole* of Jesus’ teaching – not just the Beatitudes – reverses the standards and values of this world. He even says: “The world will make you suffer, but be brave, I have overcome the world.”

Yet we live in the world and we have to negotiate with it. We can’t pretend that all the requirements, conditions and necessities of life don’t exist. I think a key to understanding Jesus’ attitude is to be found, surprisingly enough, in the Koran, the scriptures of Islam. In the Koran, which often quotes sayings of Jesus not found in the Gospels, we find this:

“The Master Jesus, blessings and peace be upon him, said that this world is like a bridge. Cross over it, but do not build your house on it.”

As long as we are in this world, we have to be sensible and live in some measure according to its ways and the Lord Jesus teaches how to do so. He told us to be as gentle as doves – but also as cunning as serpents; he told us to make use of money; he encouraged us to deal with the world shrewdly. This, incidentally, is a characteristic of all the great saints and mystics: they may have been totally God-centred, but they knew how to get on in the world – they were, above all, practical.

At the same time, while being sensible, we shouldn't allow ourselves to forget that although all these things – good and bad – *do* matter, none of them have any lasting importance. A story is told about the Buddha. A king came to him with a ring and said: "I want you to engrave something on it so that if I become puffed up with pride and vanity because of my wealth and power, I can look at this ring and be humbled. On the other hand, if I should lose my kingdom and all my riches and end up in the gutter tomorrow, I can look at it and be comforted. Unfortunately there is only space

on the ring for three words.” So on the ring, the Buddha had engraved the three words: “It will pass.” We can’t reject the world and everything it contains, because we live in it; but we *can* remind ourselves that the world and everything it contains – both good and bad – is not of any lasting importance, because one day *it will pass*. Or, rather, our time will come to leave it behind – it will pass for us.