

# *Staying Connected*

*Sixth Sunday after the Epiphany*

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Jigsaws are a bit of a family project to get it all together. Of course, you start with 1000 individual pieces and then gradually things come together. From the corners you build the edges and that becomes a frame. Then into the frame you gradually put the pieces and it begins to take shape.

Occasionally there will be a distinctive feature that will stand out and you can put together separately like a face or a flower box, but most are pieces with amorphous shapes and colours. Every now and again there will be two or three that will come together to form a bigger amorphous blob. Slowly you work your way towards it. To the end result. Pieces come together and the amorphous blobs become shapes and then images. And as the spaces get smaller, the job becomes easier until there is one space and one piece and it is done. As you step back and look from the distance the picture is clear.

I know it was Forrest Gump who declared that life was like a box of chocolates, but perhaps the Christian faith journey can be likened to a jigsaw.

I think that it is like this: When it is that we start out on our faith journey, we do have an idea about what it means overall. We have seen the picture on the box, but as we get down to it. Things are not always what they seem.

We begin our Christian journey discovering the frame - getting the edge sorted out. The corners are the anchoring points of faith. Belief in God, Holy Spirit, Jesus etc and become the measure from which we build our faith. When Jesus asked Peter the great question - "Who do you say that I am?" he was doing more than just making a casual query to pass the time. Peter's answer, indeed, each of us and our perceptions of Who is Jesus will determine our framework of faith.

If we see him only as a teacher, or a miracle worker or a good example, our response to him will be quite different to that if our understanding is that he was or is the Son of God.

The technical name for this theology, but more than just a dry academic study, it should real and living. Each of us has in ourselves a personal theology - that is how we understand God. This is the frame of our jigsaw of faith, and sometimes we discover as work on further that frame is slightly out, so we might have to rearrange the pieces and continue.

Like on a Jigsaw, our faith may see us working on several different areas at once. Some parts are obvious others will only become clear as we work on them.

Perhaps this is how best to understand the beatitudes from our Gospel reading. A beatitude is a clever saying of the formula - blessed are *Some group* for they will receive *some benefit*. In my last year at Morpeth, I spent a deal of time looking at these, and have approximately three hours of teaching on it from my project, but I won't put that into a sermon. If you are curious, you can read it in the book. There

are a number of interpretations that are valid, but for today, I would like to use the spiritual interpretation, to challenge us to grow in faith.

Jesus used the form of the beatitude to express the desired faith outcome in the believer and his message contrasts with the world. The world says blessed are the rich, the famous etc. Jesus says -**Blessed are**- the poor, the hungry, the sad, the hated and reviled. Not that there is merit in these things, but the journey into heaven will take us this way. And so as we grow in faith, we acknowledge our poverty, our hunger, our sadness and discover that to love Jesus will sometimes mean that we will be on the outer. Wealth, health, satisfaction, laughter and praise from others are not indicators that we are getting close to God, but the opposite.

Our faith journey will see us discover these things so let us look at them briefly:

**Poverty.** Perhaps this is one of the greatest fears of our western society. We put so much effort into the accumulation of wealth and possessions to defend us from poverty. And yet there are two things we do not understand. To God, who owns the Universe, the wealth of Bill Gates is like a farthing and second, that all the wealth in the world is no protection from things like illness or death. When we look into the face of God, our insignificance becomes apparent. It is not poverty that is to be praised, but the realisation that we are poor; for when we know that we are poor, then there we will know to ask and become dependant on God.

“Blessed are you who are poor, for yours is the kingdom of God.

**Hunger.** - Like poverty, Hunger is not to be praised, but the realisation that there is more is. Satisfaction leads to lethargy. Think of the lion sunning itself after the devouring of the kill. Hunger drives us to look for more.

One of our greatest enemies to spiritual growth is that sense that we have arrived. That what we have is all there is and all we need. What an arrogant position, to think that we might possibly know all there is to know about God. To be satisfied will mean we will stop looking for more, but to be hungry opens us up to the possibility that we can get more before we are filled. It is this desire for more that opens up the way for us to experience more from God.

“Blessed are you who are hungry now, for you will be filled.

**Sorrow.** No one wants to be sad, but like hunger and poverty, Sorrow is the key to greater things in our faith journey. But it not depression or general sadness that God seeks. The sadness that leads to growth is that which comes from the experience of the heart of God. Time after time, Jesus responds to the people because of their needs and he had compassion. We know that we are getting close to the heart of God, when the things that make him sad make us sad as well.

Our world is incomplete because of evil, and men, women and creation all labour under the destruction of Sin. Take Israel and Palestine. Do you not feel sadness, that the sins of the fathers are destroying the children. That the hatred and evil that is destroying the hearts and minds of the children has them so bound that a human solution is impossible. Perhaps the most telling question that I ever had asked was - Do you weep for the lost? Telling, because it showed me how far I was from the heart of God.

“Blessed are you who weep now, for you will laugh.

**Finally Abuse.** A wise friend once told me that if you are making no impact on the Devil's kingdom, then he will leave you alone. In as much that man of the values of the world are evil, the presence of Good will lead to conflict. We all like to be loved, but the journey of faith may take another form. I am not talking about adopting behaviour that distresses people and destroys relationship, but behaviour that confronts evil with its values and attitudes. Abuse could be the sign that we are close to God's ways. We are not interested in a popularity contest, but to clearly bring God into the equation.

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 in that day and leap for joy, for surely your reward is great in heaven; for that is what their ancestors did to the prophets.

Like the Jigsaw, things happen over time. There is a promise of growth and protection with the wonderful image of the tree planted by the stream. Like the tree, when are close to the source of life, then growth can occur.

Let us pray for growth as individuals and as a congregation that we might get closer to the full picture

Lord help us to recognise our poverty, hunger and sorrow and to live that we might be a challenge to evil.

**AMEN**