

Emma King's Farewell Sermon

Matthew 5:3-10; 28:18-20

Emma King

Well... this is it.

My last Sermon at All Saints!

And I have been wondering for quite a while what on earth you preach on your final Sunday.

- Do you try to say something profound?
- Do you attempt to squeeze the last few years into one sermon?
- Or do you finally preach all the things you've been storing up because, frankly, what are they going to do, sack you?

(I decided against the last one).

The truth is, I don't think I can sum up these years.

There have been too many people, too many conversations, too much laughter, quite a few tears, hundreds, possibly thousands, of cups of tea, and plenty of occasions when I have thought **“Well, they definitely didn't teach us this at theological college!”**

But when I thought about what I wanted to say today, I kept coming back to these two passages:

- 1) Matthew 5: the Beatitudes.
- 2) Matthew 28: the Great Commission.

They have become foundational to the way I understand my own ministry. And I think they belong together.

- In the Beatitudes, Jesus shows us what his Kingdom looks like.
- In The Great Commission, he tells us what to do about it.

Basically... Live it! And take it with you!

Jesus says:

- Blessed are the poor in spirit...
- Blessed are those who hunger and thirst for righteousness...
- Blessed are the merciful...
- Blessed are the pure in heart...
- Blessed are the peacemakers...(NIVUK)

This is an upside-down Kingdom.

Because the world tends to say:

- Blessed are the successful.
- Blessed are the powerful.
- Blessed are the confident.
- Blessed are the people who have everything sorted.

Which is slightly unfortunate for the church.

Because if you've ever attended a PCC meeting or a standing committee meeting, you'll know we rarely have everything sorted!!

But perhaps that's the point.

Jesus doesn't begin with impressive people. He begins with ordinary people.

- People who know they need God.
- People who hunger for things to be different.
- People who choose mercy.
- People who make peace.

And during my time here, I have become increasingly convinced that this is what ministry is really about. Not being impressive. Not having all the answers. But trying to live the Kingdom of God amongst ordinary people.

And my time here has taught me that the Kingdom turns up in some wonderfully ordinary places.

Sometimes here in church: around the Communion table; at baptisms and weddings; beside hospital beds; in the privilege of walking alongside families at funerals.

But sometimes it has appeared over a cup of tea; around a table; in a community space (like The Hub); in a conversation over lunch that started off being about absolutely nothing and somehow ended up being about God.

I have learnt never to underestimate what God can do around a table. Actually, never underestimate what God can do when there is food involved!

One of the things I have loved about ministry here is discovering the power of hospitality.

You can put a poster outside saying: **COME AND DISCUSS THE MEANING OF LIFE AND THE CHRISTIAN FAITH** and strangely, people don't necessarily queue around the block.

But invite someone round, or invite yourself to someone's, put the kettle on, provide some cake and say, "fancy a chat?," and something happens.

- People talk.
- Stories emerge.
- Barriers come down.
- Relationships grow.

And every so often, in the middle of a completely ordinary conversation, there is an opening.

- "Why does the church do this?"
- "Why do you care?"
- "Do you actually believe all this stuff?"

And suddenly you realise you are on holy ground.

That's why I keep coming back to **"blessed are the merciful."** (NIVUK)

Because mercy gets close to people.

- Mercy notices.
- Mercy listens.
- Mercy doesn't demand that somebody believes what we believe before we love them.
- Mercy sees the person in front of us.

And that is the kind of ministry I have tried to have here. Not perfectly there have been things I would do differently. There have been ideas that worked brilliantly. And there have been ideas that sounded absolutely fantastic in my head and perhaps should have remained there.

That is curacy.

You get a few years to discover your gifts, and occasionally to discover, quite publicly, what your gifts are **not**.

But underneath it all, I have tried to hold onto something very simple:

People matter to Jesus.

- The person who has been in church for sixty years.
- The person who walks through the door and hasn't got a clue when to stand up or sit down.
- The person who would never dream of walking through the church door, so you meet them outside.
- The person who is full of faith.
- The person with a hundred questions.
- The person who has been hurt by church.
- The person who simply came because somebody promised there would be biscuits.

Every one of them matters to Jesus.

And then Jesus says, “**blessed are the peacemakers.**”(NIVUK)

Not people who simply like peace. Most clergy like peace (particularly about five minutes before a service begins).

Unfortunately, five minutes before a service is rarely peaceful.

- You suddenly remember you haven't asked someone to read, so you grab one of your daughters... again!
- You realise you haven't got the microphone for communion.
- Someone reminds you that we've not prayed before the service!!.
- And then somebody approaches you with those terrifying words: **“Emma, just one quick thing before we start...”**

(There is no such thing as “one quick thing” before a service.)

But Jesus says “**blessed are the peacemakers.**”(NIVUK)

People who build bridges; people who cross divides; people who bring others together.

And that has shaped how I think about the Church's place in the world. I don't think the church should simply be a building in the community.

I believe church should be woven into the community.

The Welcome Café is Church on a Monday...

- A place where relationships are built.
- Where people who might never normally meet sit around the same table.
- Where people are known by name.
- Where questions are welcome.
- Where somebody can belong before they have worked out exactly what they believe.

A place where people encounter the extraordinary welcome of Jesus.
And perhaps this is the most personal thing I want to say today.

Because I have experienced that welcome here myself.

When I came to All Saints, I didn't come with a perfect story.
You know that.

- I came with a past.
- I came with mistakes.
- I came with parts of my story that I am not proud of.
- I came knowing what it is to look back at your life and wonder: *"How on earth did God get me from there to here?"*

And yet you accepted me. You didn't pretend my past wasn't there. You didn't ask me to become somebody else before I could belong.

You welcomed me; you trusted me; you allowed me to minister amongst you; you let me stand here and preach; you invited me into some of the most precious and vulnerable moments of your lives.

And I will never forget that.

Because you have taught me something about grace that I could never have learnt from a textbook:

Grace isn't just something we preach. Grace is something we give to one another.

I have needed that grace. I still need it. We *all* do.

And if there is room in the Church for someone like me, with my story and my past, then surely there must be room for the person who walks through these doors whose life doesn't look like ours.

- Someone who doesn't speak like us.
- Someone who doesn't think like us.
- Someone whose background is completely different.
- Someone whose life might make us uncomfortable.
- Someone who has made a mess of things.
- Someone carrying a past they wish they could change.
- Someone who isn't even sure what they believe.

Because this is something I have come to believe deeply...

We don't have to make people like us in order to love them like Jesus.

That is one of my prayers for All Saints as I leave. **Keep making room.** Not because anything goes. And not because Jesus leaves us exactly as he finds us. He doesn't.

Jesus has changed me, and thank goodness he is still changing me. But transformation begins with encounter.

It begins when somebody discovers:

- I am seen.
- I am known.
- I am loved.
- There might even be room for me.

Isn't that what Jesus did?

- He sat at tables with the people respectable religion avoided.
- He noticed people others walked past.
- He crossed boundaries.
- He welcomed outsiders.
- He touched those who were seen to be unclean.

And then, remarkably, he entrusted his mission to a group of deeply imperfect disciples.

Which brings us to Matthew 28: The Great Commission.

The risen Jesus gathers his disciples on a mountain. They have misunderstood him; they have failed him; some ran away when things became difficult.

And even now, standing before the risen Jesus, Matthew tells us:

Matthew 28:17

(NIVUK) 17 When they saw him, they worshipped him; but some doubted.

I love that Matthew leaves that in. That some *doubted*.

And Jesus sends them anyway!

Matthew 28:19

(NIVUK) 19 Therefore go and make disciples of all nations...

Go!

That little word has shaped so much of my ministry.

Because Jesus doesn't say: "Wait here and hope they come." He says: **"Go to them!"**

And when we go, we discover something wonderful. Jesus got there first.

That is one of the greatest lessons that my faith has taught me. We don't take God into the community as though God lives at All Saints and needs taking out occasionally.

God is already at work.

- In people's homes.
- In cafés.
- In workplaces.
- In schools.
- In hospital rooms.
- On our streets.
- In people's questions and hopes.

Our task is to pay attention, to listen, to notice. And then to have the courage to join in.

But there is another part to the Great Commission. Jesus doesn't simply say: "Go and be nice." He says: **"Make disciples."**

And sometimes I think we can become very good at the first part and slightly nervous about the second.

- We serve.
- We provide hospitality.
- We care.
- We build community.

All of that matters *enormously*.

But eventually somebody needs to know “why?”.

- Why do we believe every person has value?
- Why do we believe nobody is beyond redemption?
- Why do we believe forgiveness is possible?
- Why do we keep hoping?

For me, the answer is simple... because of Jesus.

And I leave my curacy more convinced of that than when I arrived.

Evangelism isn't about winning arguments or forcing faith onto somebody. It is one person saying to another, **"Come and see."**

- Come and meet the Jesus who met me.
- Come with your questions.
- Come with your doubts.
- Come with your complicated life.
- Come with your past.
- Come as you are.

Because if Jesus can take someone like me, with all the twists and turns and mistakes in my story, forgive me, restore me, call me and even dare to make me a priest, then I think we can safely say "there is hope for absolutely anybody."

And now, rather inconveniently, Jesus' word "go" applies to me too.

When I arrived as a curate, three years sounded like an incredibly long time. And then suddenly somebody asks: "What are you doing for your final Sunday?" And you think 'hang on. I only just got here!'

But here we are. And this has never simply been a training post. You have become part of my story. You have trusted me with extraordinary things. You have invited me into some of the happiest moments of your lives and some of the hardest. You have allowed me to baptise, marry, bury, pray, preach, visit, listen, laugh and occasionally make things up as I went along.

Although officially I believe that's called **ministerial formation**. You have encouraged me. You have challenged me. You have prayed for me. You have helped form the priest and the person I am becoming.

So, **thank you**.

- Thank you for taking the risk of having a me as your curate.
- Thank you for letting me learn amongst you.
- Thank you for your patience and friendship.
- Thank you for the tea and cake. And the odd glass of prosecco.
- Thank you for the laughter.
- And most of all, thank you for accepting me and my family.

But I don't want my final sermon to end with me.

Because the Great Commission isn't a job description for clergy. It is the calling of the whole Church.

So, this is my prayer for you all at All Saints...

- Be merciful.
- Make peace.
- Hunger for God's Kingdom.
- And go.

Keep looking beyond these walls. Keep opening the doors. Keep setting tables. Keep noticing people.

- And when somebody comes who isn't like you...**make room.**
- When somebody comes with a complicated story...**make room.**
- When somebody comes carrying mistakes...**make room.**
- When somebody asks awkward questions...**make room.**

And when somebody arrives who doesn't know the rules, please don't give them a rule book with a list of what we do and a list of phone numbers.

- Give them a cup of tea.
- Learn their name.
- Listen to their story.
- Love them.

Because you did that for me. And now my prayer is that you will keep doing it for others.

And hold onto the final promise Jesus gives his disciples:

Matthew 28:20

(NIVUK) ²⁰ **And surely I am with you always, to the very end of the age.'**

Clergy come and go. Curates *definitely* come and go. Churches change. Communities change. Some things finish and new things begin.

But Jesus *remains*. The Jesus of the Beatitudes. The Jesus who chooses mercy. The Jesus who makes peace. The Jesus who notices the people the world overlooks. The Jesus who sits at tables with people who haven't got life sorted. The Jesus who takes ordinary, imperfect people, people like you and people like me, and says: "I choose you. And I send you."

There are still people out there who think the Church could never possibly be for someone like them.

Show them that they're wrong. Show them mercy. Show them grace. Make room for them. Love them even when they are not like you, and point them towards Jesus.

That is my prayer for you. **Trust Jesus. Make room. And keep going.**

Because he has promised: **"I am with you always."**

Amen.

Final Blessing

There are so many things I want to tell you, but instead I lift my eyes towards heaven, stretch out my hands and bless you. I'm not entirely sure how blessings travel and how they're supposed to move through time and space and rest upon the shoulders of those they grace. I just pray you see your place, in the unfolding of this creation and know how lost we'd be without you. Especially on the days when the car won't start, and the jam-jar breaks. I'm making your way out of bed takes everything you have.

I hope this blessing reaches you in the afternoons when you feel overlooked, when you don't get the credit you deserve. On the days when dinner is overcooked, and the sink gets blocked. When you're taking out the rubbish and the bag splits, and the bin juice drips onto your socks. When you realize you forgot to bring your key and you're locked outside, and the skies open and you feel the first of 10,000 drops.

I hope this blessing reaches you in the middle of the night, wrestling with regrets, punching into the sheets deafened by anxious thoughts, or rocking a baby back and forth who won't relent and let you sleep. I hope this blessing finds its way into the ward as you wait for the results or try to absorb information that has changed your entire life with a handful of words.

I hope this blessing holds you when none of it makes sense and you're trying to collect the pieces of your heart scattered across the floor dancing into the air like paper in the wind. I hope it holds you in its arms when you are out of options and you've run out of road. And all you can see are your problems and a future you don't control. I hope it makes eye contact when the shame feels unbearable and when your skin feels unwearable. I hope it defines you as a miracle in motion, daring and incomparable, and remind you that "Grace, o grace! It can make broken things repairable."

I hope this blessing turns the tables alongside you as you rally against injustice and the forces that oppress and reminds you that you're part of this revolution. This pursuit of liberation bringing healing to the hurting the deserted and distressed.

I hope it opens up your eyes to see the holy inconvenience leading you to lay an extra place at the table, nudging you to heat up enough leftovers for the angels. I hope it leads you to the mountain top and when you reach the summit, I hope you see that you're standing on the life you once rejected and rubbished.

And what I really hope, is that you stand and shout with sacred zeal "This is the main event!" In all its wonder and awkward feelings. I hope you see how far you've come but you're only getting started. I hope this blessing leads you to live wholeheartedly honest and glad. Because the life you've always longed for is hidden in the life you have.

So, the blessing of Almighty God, Father, Son, and Holy Spirit, be among you and remain with you. Today and always.

Always walk in the light...Amen.



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