

# HAPPY & BLESSED

A STUDY COURSE FOR LENT  
BASED ON THE BEATITUDES

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## **Dedication**

This book is dedicated to the Bible Study Group that met during Lent 2018 in Wickham Skeith Village Hall and explored with me the Beatitudes.

It was a blessing and a happiness to do that.

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## About the author

Having spent rather a long time at various universities including Cambridge, Oxford and the University College of Rhodesia and Nyasaland, John was ordained to a curacy in the diocese of Liverpool in 1968. He spent a second curacy in an inner-city ex-slum parish in Birmingham and became rector in the same parish. After a five-year period at Church House, Westminster where he was Senior Selection Secretary, helping to select ordinands, he was made Canon Treasurer at Southwark Cathedral and Diocesan Director of Ordinands and Post-ordination training.

Following four years as Vicar of Roehampton he moved to become Archdeacon of Sudbury in the Diocese of St Edmundsbury and Ipswich in 1995. When he retired in 2006 he was asked to be the part-time Diocesan Director of Education, a job he did for nearly four and a half years before retiring for a second time. It has been during these retirement years that John has been writing for Kevin Mayhew, in between being a governor at a primary academy, playing golf and enjoying river cruises.

For details of all John Cox's books, please visit our website: [www.kevinmayhew.com](http://www.kevinmayhew.com)

## Introduction

Lent has traditionally been a time of fasting, but it might also be seen as a festival time – a festival celebrating our willingness to face who we are without excuses, without seeking to put the blame on others. It is to that extent a wilderness festival – no bunting and marching bands, but a festival in a place that is demanding and where there is nowhere to hide.

The human race finds it difficult to take much in the way of real life. That is also true for each individual. We too often hide from the depth of things and satisfy ourselves with the surface truth, especially when it comes to ourselves. We are grateful for the distractions of relationships, for the demands of work, for the pleasures of entertainment. Each has its place, of course, but if we are to try to see ourselves as we are in reality, we need to take time out. For Jesus that was no short weekend retreat but a long time (40 days). It was a time of exploration and discovery and then a time of testing to check out whether what had been discovered could stand up in the face of other, more attractive possibilities.

We may not be able to give ourselves exclusively to such a lengthy wilderness experience. We may be privately glad that we can't, but we can still enter into something of that retreat from all our other, everyday busy-ness. That may be found in a time of quiet reflection each day, a time of Bible reading and of prayer. A time to

be, in the presence of God. A time to listen rather than speak. A time to be open to what God the Spirit is doing in us and with us. A time to strip off pretence and dare to face a bit of reality, to discover who we really are, who God is making us into.

### **A study book**

Just as we discover God, not only in the depths of our individual being but in the fellowship of others, so too our Lent retreat might well take the form of a time of study, either on our own or with other people, searching together to see what God is asking of us, what he is saying to us. This book is offered for either.

It takes as its subject the Beatitudes, those well-known sayings of Jesus that we so easily skip over, assuming we know what they have said but missing the reality of their challenge. Each section offers both an opening and closing prayer, some readings and introductory comments, together with suggested questions you might wish to explore.

### **For use as a course**

The following comments are directed mainly at those who wish to use this book as the basis for a group course.

Ideally it would be helpful if each of the group had with them a copy of the book as well as a Bible – the version does not matter, in fact different versions will

enrich the sessions. How the sessions are conducted is really for the group itself to decide. Some may want each session to be led by someone who has taken careful note of the introductory material and to share that with the group as a whole. Others may prefer to get each member to prepare for the session by careful reading of the introduction sections and then to allow open discussion in the group itself, perhaps around the questions suggested in the text. Flexibility is the main thing. What matters is that the group decides how to use the material so that it is able to get to grips with the Beatitudes themselves and see what Jesus was saying to his disciples then and what he is saying to us as his disciples now.

### **Not afraid to speak**

Lent is a time when, with sensitivity towards each other, we seek to be real, admitting our doubts, affirming our deeply-held beliefs, looking for new insights, listening to each other's contributions. Too many people in too many church study groups have felt they could not speak because they do not see things quite the way the leader does. This is especially likely if the leader is a clergy person. We might be afraid lest others think we don't have the faith they have always assumed we had. It might be easier to nod a silent agreement when in our hearts we are not even sure we understood what has just been said. We fear disagreeing lest we be seen

as a nuisance or of being argumentative. We keep quiet because there's a person who seems to be always speaking and we don't feel it would be polite to interrupt. But this is a time to share what is real – and not to be afraid. Speaking out can, of course, be rude but not if it comes from a desire to discover the reality for ourselves and for others. If we seek to give others space and trust they will give us space too.

What is offered in the introductory comments are a few possible ways into the text and about the text. There is so much richness in what Jesus said and not everything is immediately obvious, not least because it was spoken out of a particular situation and in a time when ideas, even religious ideas, were not necessarily understood in quite the same way as we see them now. What is written is intended to stimulate thought and discussion, not exclude other opinions.

It is hoped that both individual readers and groups will, through their study, find a time of blessing.

## **Introduction to the Beatitudes**

### **A prayer to prepare us for study**

Heavenly Father,  
in whose presence we meet,  
guide us by your Spirit,  
that in our listening and our speaking  
we may together discover your blessing  
and the gift of the happiness only you can bring.  
We ask this in Jesus' name.  
Amen.

### **A reading**

Matthew 5:1-10

When Jesus saw the crowds, he went up the mountain;  
and after he sat down, his disciples came to him. Then  
he began to speak, and taught them, saying:

‘Blessed are the poor in spirit, for theirs is the  
kingdom of heaven.

‘Blessed are the meek, for they will inherit the earth.

‘Blessed are those who mourn, for they will  
be comforted.

‘Blessed are those who hunger and thirst  
for righteousness,  
for they will be filled.

‘Blessed are the merciful, for they will receive mercy.  
‘Blessed are the pure in heart, for they will see God.

‘Blessed are the peacemakers, for they will be  
called the children of God.

‘Blessed are those who are persecuted for  
righteousness’ sake, for theirs is the kingdom  
of heaven.’

## **Introduction**

During the course of these five sessions we will be looking at the Beatitudes. This first session offers an introduction to their setting and an exploration of what lies behind the idea that has been translated here as ‘Blessed’ but in other translations is given as ‘Happy’ or even ‘Congratulations’.

### *The Sermon on the Mount*

Matthew sets the Beatitudes at the beginning of what we normally call The Sermon on the Mount. As with so much of the Gospel material there are various views about where the material comes from, how it is arranged, what Jesus was teaching and how the Evangelist has used it. Apart from those scholars who accept that the Sermon