Funnily enough, the text set for today is one of Audrey’s favourites and is known as the Beatitudes – a series of Blessings of God’s Kingdom. There are two versions of it, one in Matthew and this one in Luke. The Matthew one comes from the Sermon on the Mount, and comprises of eight blessings whereas the Luke version is only four and took place on the ‘Plain’. They have been the subject of much scholarly debate as to whether they took place on different occasions, or were interpreted differently by the author of the two Gospels – because, as we shall see, they are quite different in what they say, or there is always the possibility that I like the best, Jesus pulled an old sermon out of the bag and extemporised and embellished it – which of course I never do.

The Matthew version focuses on the righteous and Spiritual side of things, for example:

Blessed are the poor in spirit, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven.  
Blessed are those who mourn, for they shall be comforted.  
Blessed are those who hunger and thirst after righteousness,  
for they shall be satisfied.  
Jesus gives us a vision of a world redeemed by love, and the qualities of discipleship which will bring about that transformation.

The Luke version, when rearranged however is a series of opposing ideas:

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

“But woe to you who are rich,    for you have already received your comfort  
Blessed are you who hunger now,    for you will be satisfied. “

Woe to you who are well fed now,    for you will go hungry.

This version is a bit more confusing isn’t it?

If you think about the words of the Magnificat, Mary praises God because He has ‘filled the hungry with good things and sent the rich away empty handed’. And Jesus quoted Isaiah when he preached in the synagogue in Nazareth that the Spirit had anointed him to ‘preach the Gospel to the poor’ and when Jesus says, “Blessed are you who are poor,” he is referring to those who have recognized that the greatest need in life is spiritual, not material. You see, there are two ways of looking at this. Firstly, from the spiritual side, Blessed are you who go home today and empty your bank accounts into, hopefully, St Martin’s coffers, and blessed are you who give the contents of your food stores to Alan for the homeless in Bristol because then you are completely free to concentrate on God-and tha’s essentially what the disciples did when they decided to follow Jesus but another way of looking at it is this. When Jesus announced woe to those who are rich, eat well, and enjoy fame and admiration from people, he isn’t saying that wealth, good food, and popularity are bad things. He is saying that when we start to take material blessings for granted, our family and friends our homes, our jobs, when we look back on our lives and say, “I’ve done rather well” or worse still, we think that we’ve somehow acquired these gifts by our own efforts, all by ourselves, we abandon God, and our self-dependence will be our spiritual downfall.

I am sure that dear Audrey contemplated the Beatitudes for a life time and perhaps, so should we, but I promised a short sermon today so: Amen.