While Susan and Stephen were preparing their marriage ceremony, they approached me with a problem. They were selecting readings from a collection in a marriage preparation booklet and had each chosen a different Gospel reading. Each felt that their reading said something special about their beliefs and hopes; each could see that what the other wanted to say was also important. Their gentle question to me was: what can we do about it?

I looked at the passages and realised that although they were separated in the marriage booklet, in the Gospel itself the passages were next to each other and that in fact they belonged together and formed the exordium or introduction to Jesus’ first major discourse, which we know as the Sermon on the Mount. That is the Gospel reading that you have just heard. (Matthew 5: 1-16)

The Sermon on the Mount is about the Kingdom of God. Jesus’ mission in the world was to bring the Kingdom of God to bear. Strictly, the Kingdom of God belongs to the life we will share after life in this world, but it has to be prepared for and worked for in this world. Jesus was also confident that even in this life it is possible for us to have intimations or glimpses of what life in the Kingdom can be. The mission that Jesus handed on to his followers was to bring the Kingdom in to be ing.

Seen in this light the Gospel passage is very interesting and breaks up into three parts. The first part consists of the first four beatitudes, in which Jesus declares the poor, the weak, the distressed and those seeking justice to be happy. This is strange. How can it be that the poor and the distressed are happy? The answer is that here Jesus is telling us about the conditions that will be present in the Kingdom. If we attain the Kingdom, the poor will indeed be heard. Their being heard will be evidence of the presence of the Kingdom.

The second part consists of the second four beatitudes, which spell out the virtues of those who work for the Kingdom. They will be merciful, pure in heart, peacemakers and enduring. The third part consists of the last beatitude and of the sayings about salt and light. These are exhortations to the followers of Jesus to work for the Kingdom, to be salt that seasons and light that shines.

During the time of their preparation, Stephen and Susan have shown themselves to be serious and hopeful about marriage and about their life together. At the same time, they know that it will have its difficulties. The readings reflect this. In the first reading (Colossians 3: 12 – 17), Saint Paul articulates some of the virtues necessary for a fruitful life together – compassion, kindness, humility, gentleness and patience. The reading from Gibran speaks of love that will bind the marriage – two will become one, yet always be two. The Gospel about which I have spoken puts forward the ideal of bringing the Kingdom to bear through the life they share in marriage.

I want to suggest a goal that they might pursue, if they are to achieve the ideals that they have expressed today. We all know that men and women are different. That is a good part of what makes marriage so worthwhile and so interesting. But it also makes misunderstanding possible. Women and men sense differently and bring different feelings to their perception of the world around them. These different sensibilities lead to differences of understanding. It is here that disagreement can break out that is not just disagreement between two headstrong people but rather real difference between two people who see and understand the situations in which they are involved differently.

We deal with these differences in different ways, sometimes by telling jokes, oftentimes by knowing when to be quiet, at other times by tolerating one another. There is a deeper way. In love we can come to accept that the visions and understandings of the one we love are valid, even if we cannot get to them directly ourselves. In trust, we can learn to grasp the world through four eyes not two, with two hearts not one and with understanding that goes beyond what we could achieve alone.

If Susan and Stephen can understand in this way, they will be bringing the Kingdom of God to bear around them. The poor will be heard, and the sorrowful will be comforted. And if they make this a habit of life, they will show others the way to the Kingdom, and they will be the salt of the earth and a light that shines for everyone.