



Nothing
Rev Cate Thorn
Year C, Ordinary 6
Jeremiah 17:5-10; Luke 6:17-26
16 February 2025

Blessed are you who are poor
Blessed are you who are hungry now
Blessed are you who weep now
Woe to you who are rich
Woe to you who are full now
Woe to you who are laughing now

How do we understand this in our contemporary context?

Luke's quite concrete about this the poor, the hungry and those who are weep are blessed **now**. Unlike Matthew, Luke doesn't spiritualise the plight of the poor and their poverty, their relief is not deferred to the hereafter.

If we put this text in its ancient Palestinian context, poverty can be understood as both an economic **and** a social reality. Essential to such understanding is the idea of 'limited good'. In modern economics we assume goods are, in principle, in unlimited supply. If there's a shortage we produce more, if one person gets more of something it doesn't automatically mean someone else gets less, it may mean the factory has to work overtime so more become available.

In ancient Palestine however, the experience was the opposite. Not only did all goods exist in limited, finite supply but also all goods were already distributed. Such an idea wasn't limited to material goods it extended to include honour, friendship, love, power, security and status. Because the 'pie' couldn't get any bigger if one person had a

larger piece, automatically someone else had a smaller piece. An honourable person was interested only in what was rightfully theirs, with no desire to have more, that is, to take what was another's. To acquire, implied gain by means of taking or stealing from others, profit making and the acquisition of wealth was therefore assumed to be the result of extortion or fraud.¹

To be labelled rich was as much a **social** and **moral** indicator as an economic one. It meant having the power to take from someone weaker, that which was rightfully theirs. Being rich was synonymous with being greedy. Being poor suggested your inability to defend what was yours, it meant you'd fallen below the status to which you were born, you were defenceless and without recourse. Throughout the NT poverty is associated with a condition of powerlessness or misfortune. To be rich or poor wasn't an exclusively economic condition. Rather it described your social condition relative to one's neighbours: the poor were the weak and the rich were the strong. In such a cultural context, "Blessed" might mean: "How honourable" On the other hand, "Woe" might imply: "How shameless."²

Such historic diversion is informative and interesting. But it can distance us from the discomfort today's gospel may cause us. Put within a context so different and removed from ours, absolve our responsibility to take seriously the challenges it presents in our time and context.

I mean who wants to be poor, who wants to be hungry, who wants to weep? I doubt the poor, the hungry or those who are weeping **want** to be that way. So, what do the poor, the hungry and those who weep **have** that the rich, the full and those who laugh do not?

Might I suggest **nothing**? But let us consider this ... nothing.

A slight diversion to explore. One of the privileges of the ministry of baptism is being invited into the homes and the lives of parents who want their child to be baptised. When I visit, the joy of the parents at

¹ Bruce J. Malina and Richard L. Rohrbaugh, *Social-Science Commentary on the Synoptic Gospels*, (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1992), 324.

²ibid, 322.

the miracle of their child is apparent. Along with the desire to protect and provide for their child and for the church to be part of this. A place their child can belong, learn, and develop a set of values. As parents speak of their plans to provide the best for their child, there seems much that needs to be done for their child to grow well. As if their child needs a lot done **to** it.

And I pondered that. When a baby is born, it's born with what? Life of course, yet there's also this sense of not a lot more, of nothingness, a baby is completely vulnerable, needy and dependent on its parents.

And parents' respond with an incomprehensible up swell of love. It renders them likewise vulnerable. As if the 'nothingness' need of the baby generates such response.

Nothing ... seems to involve being defenceless, powerless and weak as well as vulnerable, dependent, and in need. Well, this doesn't seem any more attractive than poor, hungry and weeping, does it?

How does our scriptural tradition deal with this 'nothing'? Genesis opens, "In the beginning God created the heavens and the earth, the earth was a formless void and darkness covered the face of the deep."

Formless void in the original Hebrew reads as "Tohu Va-Vohu ... literally ... an 'empty desert' ... an empty waterless land ... that 'awaits' to be developed,"³ there's something positive here. The English translation suggests an **absence**, of chaos and mess. By virtue of the negative quality of such translation, the idea of 'creation from nothing' evolved.

Whether read as nothing, or as empty desert, the tradition intimates that the hovering presence of divine creativity, of existence, the source of life, of God speaking the world into existence with a breath, resides.

³ <https://www.hebrewversity.com/chaos-order-hebrew-meaning-tohu-va-vohu/>

Nothing: defenceless, powerless, weak, vulnerable, dependent, in need ... oh and divine creativity, existence, source of life, speaking existence in to being.

When we're rich, well fed and full of laughter we exist in a way that presupposes power. The power of choice, of control, or at least our right to have control. To remain in control, to be self-determining we must also be self-protective. The extent we can care for others determined by what we can manage, whether financial, physical, emotional or spiritual. To **not** manage frightens us, for who are we if we're defenceless, powerless, weak, vulnerable, dependent, and in need, the spectre of 'nothing' looms.

For all our being in control, for all our power and self-determination, the world doesn't seem to be becoming a better place. What if "we who are rich, who are full, who are laughing now" had more of 'nothing' in our lives? Let down our guard enough to risk facing what seems the formless void of nothing. Wherein might also dwell the hovering presence of divine creativity breathing us into being.

Learn to accept we are vulnerable and dependent. When we're poor we **know** we're in need, when we're hungry we **are** in need of food, when we're weeping, we **are** in need of relief. When we're in need, we **know** we're dependent on another. When we give, it's not something we **do to** another it is something we **share with** each other and the benefit is mutual. Then each in our community, rich and poor, can participate in their rightful share of material goods, honour, friendship, love, power, security and status and live as those God's breath is speaking into existence.

We can't transform the world by trying harder, any more than we can make God love us more by doing better. Can we risk living our lives in a different way? Present to this 'nothing' of God presence, insisting in the potential of this to transform who and how we are and how the world can be. Where changing the world's not **all** up to us, not all about what **we** think we should do. Rather, change happens when we're vulnerable and open and willing to cooperate with God and with each other. It seems to me, the way our world is, what do we have but 'nothing' to lose?