



Rev Helen Jacobi
Blessed?

Ordinary Sunday 6
Jeremiah 17:5-10
Luke 6:17-26
13 February 2022

You are all brave souls turning up for church this morning. Brave not because of covid but because by being here you have to listen to this gospel from Luke. It should carry its own health warning.

Blessed are the poor and woe to the rich.

Very uncomfortable stuff.

Woe to you who are rich, who are full, and those whom others speak well off – the outlook for you is not good.

Do we want to be beaten up by these words?

Sure we might be considered rich - but we give away some of our money, we help others – that is ok isn't it?

And why would we want to be poor?

Well, welcome to the gospel of Luke

Matthew's version of the Beatitudes (which is the name for this passage) was written for people like us - Blessed are the poor in spirit, blessed are those who recognise their poverty of spirit, their need for God in their lives.

Blessed are those who hunger and thirst for righteousness, blessed are the pure in heart, blessed are the peacemakers.

Matthew's beatitudes are a lot easier.

But that is not the way Luke tells it.

Luke is going to make us uncomfortable all year.

We're going to have the rich young ruler who couldn't give up his possessions, the rich man in hell and the poor Lazarus in heaven, the man who builds his barns full of grain and then dies suddenly, the wedding guests who can't be bothered coming to the wedding feast, and Zacchaeus the tax collector.

Luke always emphasises Jesus' teaching on the poor.

No escape for us this year.

However, as always it helps to understand the setting and the way this story comes about.

The way Luke tells it Jesus has been travelling about with his followers for a bit.

The Pharisees – the religious leaders of the day are keeping an eye on him and prior to today's reading have pulled him up for picking grain on the Sabbath (which was classified as work and so was forbidden) and for healing a man on the Sabbath in a synagogue, also forbidden.

The Pharisees we are told "are filled with fury".

So Jesus retreats and goes up a mountain to pray all night.

After this he selects 12 from among the followers to be "apostles".

They are no doubt, excited, thrilled, he has chosen me - wow - but then as they come down the mountain they see the crowds coming, and they are afraid.

They have already seen the demands placed on Jesus, and they see that he has no home, he travels, he has no money, no food.

What about their families, their businesses - a reasonable question to ask - they are attracted to this dynamic man and his teaching - but give up everything to follow him?

And so Jesus looks up at his disciples and says:

blessed are you who are poor, because you have given everything up to follow me - yours is the kingdom of God - right here, right now. And you who are hungry and worry what will we eat - blessed are you, you will be filled not only with food but with love.

And you who weep and mourn because you leave behind your families to follow me, you will laugh, laugh with joy at the new

family. And yes people will hate you on my account, they will revile you and defame you - my blessing will sustain you.

But over there - you Pharisees standing in the back there, criticising and cursing - woe to you.

You might be rich now but that is all you will ever have.

Your bellies are full now but there will come a day when you hunger.

And you laugh and scoff, but you will weep one day.

And woe to you if you listen to the false praise of these people - they don't mean it - their ancestors praised false prophets and where did it get them.

Can you imagine the silence, the mouths open, the Pharisees melting away into the crowd, and the disciples what would they have felt - encouraged?

I think actually they would have felt even more scared.

The trouble with this picture though, of the disciples in the inner circle being encouraged and the Pharisees in the back row being discouraged, is that it divides people up into one group or another.

We fall into the trap of saying – am I a disciple or a Pharisee?

As Debie Thomas points out in her blog this week¹ “Jesus’ sermon is not a sorting exercise between the good folks and the bad folks; he addresses every blessing and every woe to every person. This is the human pattern, this is where all of us live.We invite blessing every time we find ourselves empty and yearning for God, and we invite woe every time we retreat into smug and thoughtless self satisfaction.”

But even Debie Thomas in her excellent blog is slipping into the Matthew version of the Beatitudes which make them more spiritual and less concrete.

The Jesus in Luke is being very clear and very bold .

This is Jesus the prophet, standing in the tradition of Old Testament prophets and naming things as they are.

¹ <https://www.journeywithjesus.net/lectionary-essays/current-essay>

The prophets of the Old Testament always said God had a preference for the poor, the widow and the orphan – but the people had trouble grasping that and always felt if you were poor you must not be blessed by God.

Jesus shocks them into remembering “blessed are you who are poor” – God is with you more than anyone else.

On Friday the City Mission staff and whanau walked from their temporary home in Union St back to Homeground.

City Missioner Helen Robinson declared – We are Home!

And it struck me how much the Mission building is a living out of Luke’s Beatitudes.

If the poor and the hungry are the blessed of God then how can we live out that blessing?

We live it out by being part of the City Mission support crew who provide a home – not a run down old building - but a beautiful space which any of us would feel glad to spend time in.

From yesterday those in need will have been served breakfast in Hae Ata the dining room. From tomorrow the staff will meet with people who come in need.

From later in the month or next month residents will start to move in.

“Blessed are you who are hungry now, for you will be filled”

And so we bravely turn up today to hear these challenging words.

We move away from standing with the Pharisees, ensnared by their sense of privilege.

We try to stand with the poor so that we are reminded of our own dependence on God.

And we allow the words of Jesus and the words of our liturgy to sit with us.

We give ourselves time and space to seek God’s spirit.

That is until next week when we will be back and Luke will tell us to love our enemies.

Come if you dare!