



Sixth Sunday after the Epiphany

Sermon by Revd Sharmain James



Sunday 13 February 2022

READINGS

Jeremiah 17:5-10; Psalm 1; 1 Corinthians 15:12-20; Luke 6:17-26

Blessing & Woes

May the words of my mouth and the meditation of my heart be pleasing in your sight, Lord, my strength and my Redeemer.

In our Gospel reading we heard Luke's version of the "Beatitudes". You might be more familiar with the version in Matthew's gospel which we tend to hear often. But unlike Matthew who softens things a bit by writing: blessed are the poor in spirit – Luke writes: Blessed are you who are poor. Where Matthew writes "Blessed are those who hunger and thirst for righteousness – Luke writes "blessed are you who hunger now. These words of Jesus from Luke's account of the beatitudes are so extraordinary that they stop us in our tracks and force us to take notice. Even many who do not embrace Christianity have found these words insightful.

As with the Matthew account – there is a large crowd of people who have gathered to hear Jesus. Luke tells us they are from "all Judea, and Jerusalem and the coastal waters of Tyre and Sidon." In other words, all of Israel is represented there, waiting for Jesus to teach and heal. Jesus walks among the crowd. It is while Jesus is going among the crowd and healing them that he looks up to his disciples to deliver this sermon – of blessings and woes. However the teaching of Jesus is addressed not just to his chosen disciples it is also addressed to "a great crowd of people" from both Jewish and non-Jewish areas. This is to say that the teaching is for everybody and not just for a chosen few.

These people could be potential disciples as well, so it is important that the crowds are in earshot of the message. All these people would have heard Jesus' teaching - but I imagine they would have received Jesus teaching completely in a different way. The same is true for us. As you listened to this gospel reading – What did you hear? What did they hear? What do we hear? I'm sure you all heard a radically different take on what it means to be "Blessed" Jesus connects blessing with precisely the opposite things we would. How blessed do you feel when you are poor, hungry, sad or oppressed? As the crowd listened to Jesus that day - there would have been those who were in one or more of those situations. Surely some might have been angry or, at the very least, annoyed at these words.

Try telling someone who is suffering that 'he/she is blessed it will all work out in the end', and see what response you get. But others would have taken comfort from them. If you are poor or down-trodden with limited prospects of improving your lot in life, then these words appear to offer hope. The assurance that things will work out in the end, the promise of eternal life, has brought many people comfort during grief and other trials. But Jesus didn't stop there. His definition of blessing has a flip-side that could create even more issues for certain sections of his audience, us included. For he continued:

"...woe to you who are rich, for you have already received your comfort.

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

Woe to you who laugh now, for you will mourn and weep.

Woe to you when everyone speaks well of you, for that is how their ancestors treated the false prophets" (v24-26).

How might these words have been received? The downtrodden and poor probably liked them. There might be some consolation for the disadvantaged in hearing Jesus take a swipe at the rich, promising that they would get their just desserts. But anyone who was well off, or even just content in life, could have been confused, challenged, angered, or unsettled by these words. These blessings and woes may seem hard to swallow. We do not view poverty, hunger and weeping as blessings – and we do all we can to avoid insults and hate.

What are we to do with this reading?

How can we receive this reading?

It can be hard to get to the bottom of the message Jesus is trying to convey here. But at the heart of it is the way Jesus challenges our natural understanding of what it means to be blessed. In Jesus day - Wealth and health and happiness were seen as signs of God's favour. Poverty and sickness and misfortune were seen as signs of God's displeasure. Thankfully we are not so superstitious in our understanding these days. Or are we? The connection between what we have and how blessed we feel is still very much ingrained in us as is the understanding that bad things shouldn't really happen to God's good, blessed people. It is ingrained so deep that Jesus had to use this challenge to teach us – and to try and draw it out. He made it very clear that our level of blessing is not dependent on circumstances: Wealth and health and popularity do not signify that a person is blessed, even though they might feel it. Poverty and sickness and oppression do not signify that a person is cursed, even though they may feel it.

It is not circumstances that determine whether or not a person is blessed or cursed. God alone determines this! Being blessed is not about what we have. It is about who we are! We are God's children. We are members of his family. We had nothing of worth to offer God in order to secure a place in his family. It has come about purely through his actions of grace.

And that makes us truly, richly and fully blessed – already now and also in the future. Wealth and health and reputation can all be taken away – but 'nothing can separate us from the love of God that is in Christ Jesus our Lord' (Romans 8:39). With this definition and understanding of what it means to be blessed, it transforms the way we see and live our lives. Irrespective of our own circumstances, irrespective of how much or how little we think we might have, we can still be a blessing.

So regardless of whether we are rich or poor, well-fed or hungry, happy or sad, respected or oppressed, we can show the world through our faith, hope and love what it means to be truly, and fully blessed by God! Both passages from Jeremiah 17 and Psalm 1: echoes the themes of receiving blessings that comes from God. These Blessings are similar to being a tree planted by streams of water.

The tree is not anxious about what it is or where its water will come from. There is a sense of peace and contentment, of trust and delight. The tree, the person or the congregation knows who it is, longs for no "growth beyond their proper measures" and calls itself blessed. As disciples we know God is the source of our life and so we should be deeply rooted near the source of his life-giving waters.

Amen