

Sermon for 13th February 2022, Year C, 3rd before Lent, Proper 2

Preached at St Michael Smarden and All Saints Biddenden

Luke 6:17-26

Sermon

“Woe to you who are rich! Woe to you who are full! Woe to you who are laughing! Woe to you when all speak well of you!”

Oh dear, this is not how I hoped to begin my second Sunday sermon as your new priest! I really wanted at least one more week of saying nice, encouraging things about love, kindness, and forgiveness that might encourage you to yearn for the kingdom of God, and perhaps even to speak well of me, but our lectionary has other plans for the third Sunday before Lent.

Here we are confronted by Jesus, near the start of his ministry, having just chosen his twelve disciples and healed a great many people, and now he starts to preach using these words of blessings and woes that have become known to us as The Beatitudes.

There are two versions of the Beatitudes. One is here in Luke’s gospel, but there is a longer version in Matthew’s gospel with nine blessings instead of four, and none of those pesky woes! It’s so much easier and more comforting to preach on *that* one!

You only have to look at the first blessing to realise that the two gospel writers have given Jesus’ words a distinctly different spin. Luke begins with “Blessed are you who are poor” and “Woe to you who are rich”, but Matthew recalls Jesus saying, “Blessed are the poor *in spirit*”. Oh, what a relief. It is surely possible to be both well-off, *and* poor in spirit. A little humility and we’re good to go.

But Luke doesn't let us get away with it. "Blessed are you who are poor. Woe to you who are rich". He's very explicit. But why? Almost from the beginning, Jesus has wealthy people among his followers who generously provide for his needs. And yet he tells some people, such as the rich young ruler, that they must give away all their possessions if they want to follow him.

So why is poverty so important to Jesus? Why is it blessed to be poor? Generally, those of us who have experienced poverty see no benefit in it. It is brutal to be poor, even in a rich country, perhaps especially in a rich country. There is also a danger that someone reading this passage might go away thinking that Jesus is endorsing suffering and misery for the sake of some future heavenly pie-in-the-sky reward. No, this is a mistake. Jesus doesn't want us to suffer. He is challenging us to recognise that individual wealth and comfort and power isolate us from one another and make it difficult if not impossible to truly love each another, which is the whole point of our Christian faith. "It is harder for a camel to pass through the eye of the needle, than it is for a rich man to enter the kingdom of God".

Those of you who were at the Sunday service last week may remember me mentioning the two years I spent as a novice nun. I warned you I'd have more nun-stories, and here we go! Nuns, like monks, take a vow of poverty when they make their life profession after 6 years in the monastery. Never again will they own anything personally. Even the clothes on their backs are given to them as a gift by the community they live and serve in. Several of the older sisters at West Malling Abbey still refer to their bedroom – or cell as they're known – as "our cell", even though they were the only person who ever entered it. This could be very confusing for newly arrived sisters. "Here, sister, take this to our cell". What? Are we sharing?

The purpose of this tortuous use of language is to reinforce that there is blessedness in maintaining an awareness that we are utterly dependent on the

grace and generosity of God. The poor and the hungry know the reality of their situation. They know they are dependent on God's care and mercy, which is the foundation of a relationship with our Creator. The rich, on the other hand, are inclined to take comfort in ourselves and our own resources, which inevitably makes it more difficult to trust ourselves to the grace of God.

Many stories there are of novice monks and nuns who, even after 6 years in a monastery, simply couldn't give away their wealth prior to making life vows, even though they hadn't touched their money since they arrived. It is much easier to give yourself entirely to Christ when all you came with was a single change of underwear and a five-pound note, as was often the case decades ago.

This, I believe, is why Jesus says, "Blessed are you who are poor, for yours is the kingdom of God". It's not because being poor and hungry and unhappy is a fundamentally good thing, but that those who are poor and hungry and unhappy or hated as outsiders and outcasts only have God and only have love, and there is nothing to come between them.

In Jesus' day, just as it is today, being poor was basically shameful, almost a moral failure. Being poor was seen as a punishment and curse from God, for something you'd done, or maybe something your ancestors had done. Conversely, being rich was seen as a reward and a blessing, a personal reward. God must love you if you are rich!

Jesus continually turns this on its head. The first shall be last, and the last first. You aren't blessed by God if you're rich, you're blessed if you're poor, because you are closer to the kingdom of God, and ultimately, the kingdom of God is the goal. Isn't this what we long for? Isn't this really the only goal in our religion – to grow the kingdom of God in the here and now, to make earth like heaven?

We all want to be loved, to be accepted, respected, appreciated, forgiven, truly known. Isn't this what the kingdom of God looks like? Isn't it the selfless

relationships between us, the kindness and generosity in our hearts, our awareness of the God of love all around us, our authenticity and vulnerability and honesty?

Anything that throws up barriers between us, anything that distracts us from God's love, anything that makes us anxious about losing what's mine rather than sharing what's ours, these things are a dark cloud that separates us from the joy of God's presence, and the thrill of God's kingdom.

And so, Jesus's woes and warnings are all aimed at those who are preoccupied by how they look in the eyes of others. I desperately want you to think well of me, so I manipulate you with a fake smile and hide my true self. I'm afraid to trust the goodness of God or anyone else, so I cling to my own resources, and guard what I do have out of fear of being left alone, with nothing.

Far too often, people have become convinced that being a Christian is about having the right set of beliefs, but Jesus is rarely concerned about beliefs. What this gospel reading shows us is that God's primary mission from the Garden of Eden until this very day, is to teach us how to build a community where we can all be entirely ourselves and entirely loved – which is great, because that's what we all want too. We don't want to be lonely or rejected or unappreciated or ignored or misunderstood. We want people to know us, to find joy in us, to welcome us, to care for us, to see God's spirit in us.

This is why we're all here. This is why we sing and pray together, and share the peace, and the bread and wine, so that we can become like Jesus. Don't let anything get in the way! Nothing else is worth it!