

Sermon for 30th October 2022, Year C, All Saints Sunday

Preached at All Saints, Woodchurch

Luke 6:20-31 (The Beatitudes)

Sermon

In preparing this sermon I was confused at first to discover that I haven't previously preached on The Beatitudes. Surely, I must have done, I thought. Such an important passage! But then I remembered – the beatitudes appear twice in the gospels – both in Luke and in Matthew, and it's the other version in Matthew that's the more famous.

A quick comparison of the two shows us why: Matthew's version has nine blessings and no woes. It's all about comfort and rewards for being good and kind and humble and compassionate. 'Blessed are the poor in spirit, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven. Blessed are those who hunger and thirst for righteousness, for they will be filled. Blessed are the pure in heart, for they shall see God.' It also has a very spiritual focus – being holy brings spiritual rewards. There's not much there about social justice or surviving material poverty in the here and now.

This has meant that over the years Matthew's beatitudes have sometimes been used to placate oppressed and even enslaved people with the promise that all injustice, poverty and suffering in life is part of God's plan to redeem them for heaven.

In 1911, Swedish-American worker activist Joe Hill wrote parody lyrics to the tune 'Sweet by and by' that became known as 'pie in the sky'. His verses mocked the tendency of preachers to tell anyone who was downtrodden, excluded or exploited to endure their suffering in silence, because their reward is in heaven.

Long-haired preachers come out every night,
Try to tell you what's wrong and what's right;

But when asked how 'bout something to eat
They will answer with voices so sweet:
You will eat, by and by,
In that glorious land above the sky;
Work and pray, live on hay,
You'll get pie in the sky when you die.

Luke's version of the Beatitudes is written much more from this earthy perspective. Instead of nine spiritual blessings, there are four very practical ones, and, unique to Luke's gospel, four woes as well, threats of dire consequences for ignoring the plight of the hungry, the poor, the weeping, the excluded and hated.

Note that 'Blessed are the poor in spirit' in Matthew's gospel has become simply 'Blessed are the poor' here in Luke's. It's a huge and significant difference. Those who read the gospels carefully will perhaps have come to expect this distinction from Luke. He always has Jesus focusing on social justice issues of poverty and exclusion, while criticising the comfortable and wealthy for refusing to help – and perhaps even being responsible for it all the problems in the first place!

So, it's in Luke's gospel that we find Jesus' mother Mary praising God for vindicating the poor: "He has scattered the proud in the imagination of their hearts. He has brought down the powerful from their thrones and lifted up the lowly; he has filled the hungry with good things and sent the rich away empty."

And again, in Luke's gospel, Jesus' very first sermon quotes Isaiah to declare that he has come 'to bring good news to the poor... to proclaim release to the captives... to let the oppressed go free'. It's hard not to see this as a direct attack on anyone benefitting from the exploitation and exclusion of others.

Many of us, I think, might feel a little happier if Luke had done more of Matthew's spiritualising, or at least make the whole thing a little more psychological.

‘Blessed are you who are poor, but woe to you who are rich’. Ouch. Many of us, still very wealthy in global terms, would be much happier if we could adapt this a bit: ‘I am not poor, but I identify with the poor’, or ‘I send money to the poor and I care about the poor’. I think Luke would be very suspicious of this. Giving back a little of our wealth still leaves us in comfort while others can’t afford to eat or heat their homes or are at risk from climate change. It makes us squirm and object, but Luke knows exactly the impact of the words he is reporting as having come out of the mouth of the Son of God.

This is why monks and nuns for so many centuries have seen absolute poverty as a vital part of their monastic life. Often from wealthy families, these people believed that in giving away their inheritance of comfort, they would nevertheless achieve far greater blessings both in the here and now, and in the age to come.

Speaking personally, having spent two years as a novice nun before I trained to be a priest, I experienced something of how different life can feel when you are dependent on someone else for food, shelter and clothing. It starts off feeling very risky indeed. We live in a culture where to be self-reliant is highly praised, and to be in need is shameful. No-one wants to be a bother. It took me perhaps six months in West Malling abbey before I began to let go of my own ambitions, plans and anxieties for the future, and live simply day by day by day, comfortable with the basic food provided, the rough habits to wear, and the mundane jobs of cleaning, cooking, maintenance and gardening.

I remember there came a significant shift in my thinking when I realised that the other nuns loved me for who I was as a child of God, not for what I could do, or what skills or talents I brought with me when I arrived. I came with years of experience in IT, but they didn’t even let me touch a computer. I wanted to offer them my gifts and skills, but they showed me that I belonged simply as a human being. This is a kind of belonging that cannot be taken away or lost, even when age or illness forces us into decline. ‘Blessed are you who are poor, for yours is

the kingdom of God'. Surely this is the kingdom of God, to be accepted and find that you entirely and irrevocably belong.

The inevitable contrast Jesus makes in Luke's gospel is with the rich, the full, the comfortable, the well-thought-of. It's not that they're inherently wicked, but that their dependence on themselves for their comforts and security always leaves them anxious and insecure, which creates a fearful separation from one another, and especially from God.

This is why the poor and those on the margins are the ones who receive the kingdom of God – not as an arbitrary prize for good behaviour, but because they are the ones who know that they are truly dependent for everything on God, and it's this *attitude* that creates God's kingdom all around them.

To be blessed is to have a relationship with God that is not in jeopardy and never at risk. But woe to those whose own self-sufficiency traps them and cuts them off from God and the community of all the saints.

The message of the Beatitudes in Luke's gospel is that those who have been looking for happiness and contentment in nicer houses or fancy cars, or in the approval of important people, may find release in realising that these things are hollow, and that true happiness comes from accepting our dependence on God, and placing our identity in our relationship with God and one another rather than in our own successes and achievements.

The people who have realised this we call saints, and some have certainly lived out this gospel message in spectacular ways, giving up everything, including sometimes their lives, to be part of God's kingdom. But for most of us, this is a long journey, a gradual realisation that we are loved as God's children, not at all because of what we can do, or what we possess, but because we know we are dependent on him, and on one another, and there is no other way to find our true and eternal home.