

Sermon for 16th February 2025, Year C, Epiphany 6, 3 before Lent

Preached at St John's Baillieston

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, these are not the nice, encouraging words about love, kindness, and forgiveness that I so much prefer to preach on. Instead, 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, I think 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. As Jesus says, "It is easier for a camel to pass through the eye of the needle, than it is for a rich man to enter the kingdom of God".

You will know by now, since I keep going on about it, that I was once a novice nun, and nuns, like monks, take a vow of absolute poverty when they make their life profession after around 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 allowed to enter 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 being aware that we are utterly dependent for everything we have 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 themselves and their own resources, which inevitably makes it more difficult to trust themselves to the grace of God.

There have been many novice monks and nuns who, even after 6 years in a monastery, found they simply couldn't give away their wealth prior to making life vows, even though they hadn't touched their savings since they arrived. It is perhaps much easier to give yourself entirely to Christ when all you arrived with was a single change of underwear and a five-pound note, as was often the case when postulants knocked on the monastery gates in decades past.

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 good thing, but that those who are poor, hungry, unhappy or hated as outsiders only have God, 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 failed to do, or maybe something your ancestors had done. Conversely, being rich was seen as a reward and a blessing, a personal reward for good behaviour. 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 – selfless relationships between us, kindness and generosity in our hearts, awareness of the God of love all around us, 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 separate 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. He's speaking to those who are so afraid to trust the goodness of God or anyone else that they cling to their own resources and guard what they 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 so rarely concerned with 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, and love and be loved by one another. Don't let anything get in the way! Nothing else is worth it!