

Epiphany 6 C
February 11, 2007: St Aidan's & Wesley 10.30am

Luke 6. 17-26

Jesus' sermon on the plain in Luke reminds us of his more famous 'Sermon on the Mount' in Matthew. They are similar enough for most scholars to believe that they are different accounts of the same event. They are both sermons delivered to a large crowd, just following Jesus' selection of his 12 disciples. And they both focus on a series of beatitudes, or statements of blessing.

But in amidst the similarities, there are two interesting differences.

One day Jesus was surrounded by the sick,
the needy and the desperate.
They begged for healing.
As Matthew told the story,
Jesus went up a hill with his disciples,
looked down to the crowd below,
and began to teach these desperate folk that they were blessed.
They were blessed because they knew their need of God.
They were blessed because God would comfort them
in their pain.
They were blessed because God rewards the meek,
fills the hungry,
reveals himself to "the pure in heart",
and embraces "peacemakers".
The world might ignore and withdraw from such as these,
but God will bless them.

They are not blessed *because* they are poor.
Rather, they are blessed because
there is a certain something that comes to people
who are vulnerable;
an ability to depend upon God,
to give up on the idea that we are in charge,
and an ability to see the pain and vulnerability of others.
When you have been to the dark-pit,
you can understand, and love, those who have been there too.
You can see them with God's eyes.
"Blessed are the poor, for theirs is the kingdom of God".

Luke tells the story a little differently.
In his account of the same famous sermon,
Jesus is not up a mountain looking down on the vulnerable,
but down on the plain with the crowd.
It's a wonderful image – a wonderful difference to take hold of.
It tells us something about both writers.

Matthew is keen to portray Jesus as the new Moses,
the great teacher and law-giver - of Israel
(just as Moses had been).
So, Matthew has Jesus give his new commandments
up upon a mountain.
Where did Moses receive the ten commandments?
On a mountain.

Luke, on the other hand, is stronger than the other Gospel writers in his depiction of Jesus as being a healer, and one who was concerned for the outcast and the poor. Therefore it is no surprise that Luke has Jesus delivering his most famous sermon down on the plain - down among the people. Jesus the great teacher (Matthew), and Jesus the healer and friend of the outcast (Luke). Two different perspectives on the one life.

And the difference goes a little deeper. The disciples in Matthew are seated with Jesus as he preaches. They are up the mountain with him. But in Luke they must have been in among the crowd, because Luke tells us that Jesus looked, not down at the crowd, but up at his disciples, and said, "Blessed are you". Here in Luke, his blessing is directed at the disciples, who are with the crowd – with the people in need.

You, the disciples, are blessed.
Some blessing, we might respond!
 You, who are called to care for and preach to the desperate, are blessed.
 You, who are called to feed the hungry and serve the suffering, are blessed.

Truth be told, most of the time I prefer Matthew's version. I prefer to be up a mountain with Jesus, sitting at his feet, listening to his teaching as he talks to me about the circumstances of the poor. It's safer up there. But on my better days I prefer Luke, and see the way that Jesus is standing among the poor and sick, and see the way he tells his disciples that if they are down there, they are also included in the blessing.

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There is also a second, substantial difference in the two versions. Matthew only has blessings. Matthew only has Jesus saying "blessed are the meek", "blessed are the poor", "blessed are the peacemakers".

Luke, on the other hand, has not only the blessings, he also has curses.

The sermon, as Luke remembers it, was bifocal. Part one was a series of blessings – a series of beatitudes. Blessed are you who are poor, for yours in the kingdom of God. Blessed are you hungry people, for you will be filled. Blessed are you who weep. Blessed are you who are hated by others because of your love for me.

But then Jesus moves to part two.

As he did when he preached in his hometown of Nazareth,
he seems determined to highlight the fact
that there are people for whom life is experienced
as isolation and deprivation;
as something that holds no dignity.
And the reasons are not too hard to see.
He says:

Woe to you rich, for you have already received
all that is coming to you.

Woe to you who are full now, for you will be empty.

Woe to you who laugh, for you will mourn.

You have been good at working the ways of this world.
But now the reign of God is upon you.

In this moment, the dust seems to have settled
after the disastrous visit to Nazareth,
when Jesus was driven from the town after his first sermon.
Jesus didn't get to finish his sermon there,
but he certainly gets to finish this one.
And he seems to come alight.

Since Nazareth he has called 12 disciples,
and healed many people.
And now we have confirmation of where he is coming from.
The sermon is short and memorable.
So memorable,
that it is among the most famous speeches of all time.

This sermon of Jesus is very sharp,
as are all the sermons of Jesus, in fact.
They are quite a wake-up call following the gentility of Christmas.
It is not the preaching to which we have become accustomed.
But are we still willing to listen to such sermons?

Jesus can easily be worked over
into someone who only blesses, and never condemns.
We have lost something of this prophetic edge
from Christianity as it is known in the world's comfortable settings.
I know I am guilty of that myself.

So today's Gospel reading is a challenge to us.
Before the Gospel is a comfort,
it is also a sharp incision to the conscience.
Jesus makes clear that God is disruptive
before God is creative;
that God's eyes are bi-focal,
seeing not only those who long for blessing,
but also those who need to be called to account.
He not only promises beatitudes for the vulnerable,
he warns of a reckoning for the oppressors.

Where is that reckoning to be felt today?

[The sermon closed with some unscripted remarks that the author can no longer
remember! – But we can all complete it in your own words]

Revd. Peter Walker