

Blessings And Woes

The sermon given at the Parish Communion Service on 17 February 2019 by the Associate Vicar, the Revd. Wendy Wale, in Beverley Minster.

Jeremiah 17: 5 - 10; Luke 6: 17 - 26

So, it was a long time ago now, but some of you may know that I've spent time visiting and living in Africa. Before I went to spend two years teaching in Cameroon I went on a training weekend which is one of the most powerful things that I think I've ever done. Its purpose was to help us unpick the many everyday events that we assume are totally normal. But are in fact cultural constructs that might vary around the world. An obvious example might be price tags or bartering - and anybody who has been on holiday will know exactly how odd bartering feels; purchasing our meat in sanitized packs where we can pretend it never moved, as opposed to watching your dinner being slaughtered in the market before you pick the exact piece of joint you'd like; eating with cutlery or with your hands or with chopsticks; eating at a table or on the floor or sat in front of a television. All these things we think we know just how it should be done. Culture shock is very real especially when it's combined with a new language, a new level of heat and unimaginable differences in basic sanitation and infrastructure. And so they did all they could to prepare us.

We were put through a series of learning situations: we had to go to an imaginary part of the world called 'Bingo Land' (it was a great place!) and in each situation we didn't know what we were doing or what the point was. We just had to throw ourselves in, follow the instructions and keep track of how it was making us feeling, which was very often very frustrated and cross. The feedback and the reflection sessions afterwards were often mindblowing and life changing, and I hope that by telling you about one in particular we will get a better understanding of the Gospel reading we've just heard.

So each of us was given a sheet of A4 paper a little bit like this one except it had a series of circles printed on it and it was pinned on to each of our chests, and the instructions were very very simple:

You have to queue up here at the front to collect red discs and stick them on to your piece of paper and try and fill up all the circles; when you get to the front of the queue, you'll be handed a disc which you can easily slot in and then you go back to the back of the queue and start all over again. Simple, we thought, except if your surname has more syllables than the person in front of you, then you can overtake them in the queue; and you can keep on overtaking until you are behind somebody who's got a longer surname.

Well, before I met Tom, my surname was 'Brown' - one syllable. And on this weekend were a group of Russians. Some of you know where I'm going - their surnames had between three and five syllables at least. So very very quickly myself and all the other people with one syllable names were stuck at the back of the queue, no red discs and very, very grumpy. The Russians were loving it. After about 10 minutes of us standing around grumbling (can't imagine that ever happenin), somebody at the back end of the room just near where we were standing, kind of like down the stairs there, shouted out, "Come on get your blue discs here; everybody's equal; all you have to do is queue up nicely and collect a blue disc."

Then came some really important questions. Was a blue disk as good as a red disk? Why do we need these discs anyway? And what was the point of this exercise? Well you can probably imagine what happened: us bored one-syllable people with no red discs figured that blue discs have got to be better than nothing, and so we turn round and started playing a whole new game of our own - we got discs finally. The Russians weren't going anywhere: why move to a fairer system that might not count for anything when you're totally winning the one you're in already? The people in the middle were the most interesting: they were divided and deeply debating. I didn't win the game but I did get some discs on my chest, which made me feel quite important.

Now as a thoroughly English person I have a very strong sense of what queues are about - and to me, queues are all about fairness. The queue that day was not fair! At least not if you were me. But of course when we stopped to reflect, I came to realise that very few queues are actually fair - it's just that it's a bit more subtle than our game. You see: I can pay to go priority-boarding at an airport; I can pay somebody to deliver

my shopping so I don't have to queue at the supermarket; I can afford food so I don't have to queue at the food bank; I have Internet access and the skills and the confidence to use online banking so I don't have to queue at the bank; I have a European passport which currently means I don't have to wait in long customs queues - it also means I can travel; money can bypass hospital queues; the queues for school places; the wait for possessions or citizenship. The more I think about it the more I realise that our system isn't actually any fairer than the game I was playing, it's just that usually I'm the one with the Russian surname; I'm the one with the privilege; I don't really have to pay much attention to what's happening at the other end of the queue because I'm having a lot of fun.

This might seem like a very long introduction to a talk but I hope it helps us understand this difficult passage from Luke where Jesus speaks of Blessings and Woes. Because if you imagine blessings as being at the front of a queue not having to wait, and woes as being stuck at the back, bored and not being allowed to join in, it starts to make the passage come to life. Jesus had just chosen his twelve disciples, twelve being incredibly significant: everybody watching and around would have known he'd just picked a new Israel; twelve signifying the twelve tribes; these were his core team; the start of a new game; something exciting; and he was going to teach them the rules of the game.

Now, the Israelites had previously been given the rules already, the Law, and in the book of Deuteronomy there's a long list of blessings for those who obeyed the law, and curses for those who didn't. They were part of the Covenant, the agreement between God and his people. But in this passage that we've just heard read from Luke we hear Jesus giving his disciples, the renewed Israel, a radically alternative different version of the rules of the game:

"Blessed are you who are hungry, because you will be filled; blessed are you who weep, for you will laugh; blessed are you when people hate you, rejoice in that day and leap for your reward is in heaven."

Just like the game I didn't enjoy playing, everything had been turned on its head. Those who were previously excluded, left out trampled on or rejected, are suddenly head of the queue, winning the prizes, getting the discs, being offered a chance at life. Those like me who had previously expected to avoid the queue and live life comfortably, in our minds fairly, are in for a shock: "Woe to you who are rich, for you have received your consolation; woe to you who are full now, for you will be hungry; woe to you who are laughing now, for you will walk mourn and weep; woe to you when all speak well of you, for that is what their ancestors did to the false prophets.

It's not easy reading. Most of us sat here today are probably feeling a bit uncomfortable, because in terms of the global population, we are the rich, the full, the valued and the head of the queue. I imagine most of us had breakfast even if like me it was an apple while cycling down here. And most of us can pop some coins in the dish for coffee after the service.

Here's some sobering statistics:

If you have food in the refrigerator, clothes on your back and a roof overhead and a place to sleep, you are richer than 75 percent of this world. If you have money in the bank, in your wallet and spare change in a dish somewhere, you're amongst the top 8 percent of the world's wealthy. If you woke up this morning with more health than illness, you are richer than the million who will not survive this week. If you've never experienced the danger of battle; the loneliness of imprisonment; the agony of torture; the perils of starvation: you are ahead of five hundred million people in the world today. If you can attend a church meeting without fear of harassment arrest torture or death, then you are safer than 3 billion people in the world.

As we begin to turn our minds towards Lent we can perhaps appreciate afresh why Jesus received so much opposition. He was speaking to people like us: it's a bit like the banks prioritising mortgages only for refugees; the supermarkets giving sex workers and people on benefits a half price discount; the Beverley Arms Hotel throwing out all its guests and filling its rooms with homeless people - it's outrageous; it wouldn't work; it's hard to imagine; it's not fair!

Yet as we re-read and dwell on the life of Jesus, this is what he embodies: healing the lepers; praising the woman who lived the simple life and poured her ointment on him; healing the bleeding woman who had merely touched him; feeding the hungry crowds; forgiving the corrupt; engaging the outsider; rebuking the religious leaders, which is particularly painful; utterly rejecting those who refuse to acknowledge their privilege or engage with those at the back of the queue or question the unjust systems.

So where does that leave us? If we, like the early disciples have become part of Jesus's re-creation of Israel, a re-imagining of the world, how it could be, then we too become part of the way the poor receive the Kingdom of God. We are charged with feeding the hungry, walking alongside those who weep and loving and including the outcast and marginalised in society. It's what the church has done down the centuries so well - and so badly.

Each week, when we come and stand shoulder to shoulder at the communion rail, we recognise that actually each of us is utterly dependent on God's grace. Our privilege neither moves us up a queue or shuts us out: we are all equal at God's table; we are all forgiven; we are all restored; we are all sent out to live Good News. The way God forgives and treats us at his table is the way he wishes us to treat others. I know that I need to continue to wrestle with the uncomfortable feelings that this passage invokes and I invite you to do the same. Are we the blessed or the woes? I suggest that perhaps one of the most helpful answers comes from Micah:

"He has told you, O mortal, what is good. And what does the Lord require of you? To do justice and to love kindness and to walk humbly with your God."

I pray that each of us will be able to take some time this week. And if our circumstances put us in the place where we know we need to love, where we need to be fed: we will be able to seek God for that. But that others of us will be able to ask God what would he have us do, to walk alongside those who need to experience his good news. And as we do that, may we become like the people described in Jeremiah:

"Blessed are those that trust in the Lord, whose trust is in the Lord. They shall be like a tree planted by the water, sending out its roots by the stream; it shall not fear when the

heat comes, and its leaves shall stay green. In the year of drought it is not anxious, and it does not cease to bear fruit.