

The Beatitudes ...

... are you sitting comfortably?

A sermon given on the Third Sunday before Lent, 13th February 2022, by the Curate the Revd Dr Tim Kelly, in Beverley Minster

Luke 6:17-26

In the words of 'Listen with Mother', let me ask you a question. Are you sitting comfortably? Then we'll begin.

The words [of this morning's Gospel reading that] we've just heard are the words of Jesus, commonly known as the Beatitudes. Even though they may have become familiar to us, let's not forget their revolutionary power. He is challenging long established world-views, and they are a double-edged sword: good news for those who haven't heard it for a very long time'; but also a challenge to those who consider themselves well off. For those who are sitting comfortably, these words have the power to unsettle; and for those who aren't, they have the power to offer hope and light in a dark place. Many would say that Jesus is both talking in terms of spiritual and worldly dimensions. Is Jesus 'literally' saying that it's good to be poor or that it's bad to laugh? No, his words have a deeper meaning than this. Jesus is talking about a new state of affairs, a new set of attitudes, both for the world but also for our individual hearts. Unlike a religion that simply requires religious observance - to be seen to do the right thing and to say the right words - Jesus often speaks to us about having the right heart and the right motives behind all that we do - to apparently do the right thing, but to do it with the wrong motives is to fail.

Now, Jesus was a man on a mission, and that mission was God's. This mission isn't only for our personal and individual salvation, to restore our relationship with God that was so badly broken by our sin, but it is also to make all things new. When Jesus says that he's coming to bring good news, he's talking about the good news of the imminent arrival of the Kingdom of God, a righteous kingdom with peace, justice, love, restored righteousness not just to us, but to the world, to the environment, and to the relationships we live within. Now, if you find the word righteous difficult to deal with, you might prefer to think of righteousness as Tom Wright has put it, being 'right-minded'. Jesus came to right-wise things, to make things right, putting things back as they were first intended to be.

So when I first asked the question, 'Are you sitting comfortably', I could have instead asked a more challenging question, 'Are you sitting on the side of righteousness in the world?' This is a huge and weighty question, but I ask it because Jesus isn't challenging abstract ideas or concepts here. He's challenging people, those who consider themselves rich, those who believe they are comfortable. Are we bringing the Kingdom in by our own actions and attitudes? Which side of the fence are we on? Are we part of the problem - the 'not yet'? Or are we part of the solution - the 'now', the coming Kingdom? By our attitudes, are we part of the comfortably rich who seek to insulate ourselves from others needs, or do we see ourselves as poor by recognising what we all need from others and from God by his Grace? Are you sitting comfortably, or do you mourn with those who mourn, weep with those who weep? Sacrificially include where others have been excluded?

Alongside the world's physical needs of physical debts and sorrows, Jesus is also speaking direct to our attitudes: do you consider yourself righteous in your own self? If so, he dangerously says, you're not. Now you may be wondering how it could possibly be a blessing to be poor in spirit, but it is perhaps that it's only when we're not full of ourselves, that we see the ever-present outstretched hand from God to offer comfort, light, and eternal hope. And Jesus' woes, of course, speak of the other side. We probably all at times have the capacity to be self-satisfied. But Jesus warns, if that's you, this self satisfaction won't last. So in a way, Jesus wants us to shift slightly uncomfortably in our chairs if we've been getting too comfy for the wrong reasons.

Another way of thinking about this is it can be hard, very hard, to reach out to God when our hands are apparently full, when we think we've already got everything we ever need. The tighter that we grab our fists onto what we have, the harder it can be to reach out to accept God's greater blessings for us.

Finally, our gospel passage ends with blessings that may not sound like much of a blessing at all. Blessed are you when people hate you and when they exclude you, revile you and defame you on account of the Son of Man, and of course, woe to you when all men speak well of you. Jesus is warning that 'blessings' do not mean that all things will be sweetness and light all the time - the prosperity gospel is right out the window. But instead, blessing can come when you are proud of your team colours and you are bold in speaking of why your heart is different and when you act

accordingly. Conversely, it is woe to those who treat this life like a popularity contest. What good is it if all speak well of you? You've played the game so well that you are all things to all people, all the times. Yet on the matters of the heart, your heart, you've lost your saltiness.

So - are you sitting comfortably? Jesus' words call us to examine exactly how and in what way we are sitting. They can challenge us when we have become self-reliant, self-centred, self-insulating, and self-satisfied. And when and where you may be feeling far from blessed (and, if hope feels dim to you this morning), his words can open our eyes to the gift of God's presence in our lives and the outstretched arms of a Father that wants to enfold you in an embrace.

Reading Texts

Luke 6:17-26

¹⁷ He came down with them and stood on a level place, with a great crowd of his disciples and a great multitude of people from all Judea, Jerusalem, and the coast of Tyre and Sidon. ¹⁸ They had come to hear him and to be healed of their diseases; and those who were troubled with unclean spirits were cured. ¹⁹ And all in the crowd were trying to touch him, for power came out from him and healed all of them.

Blessings and Woes ²⁰ Then he looked up at his disciples and said:

‘Blessed are you who are poor, for yours is the kingdom of God.

²¹ ‘Blessed are you who are hungry now, for you will be filled.

‘Blessed are you who weep now, for you will laugh.

²² ‘Blessed are you when people hate you, and when they exclude you, revile you, and defame you* on account of the Son of Man. ²³ Rejoice on that day and leap for joy, for surely your reward is great in heaven; for that is what their ancestors did to the prophets.

²⁴ ‘But woe to you who are rich, for you have received your consolation.

²⁵ ‘Woe to you who are full now, for you will be hungry.

‘Woe to you who are laughing now, for you will mourn and weep.

²⁶ ‘Woe to you when all speak well of you, for that is what their ancestors did to the false prophets.