



17<sup>th</sup> February  
Jeremiah 17.5-10  
Luke 6.17-26

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2019

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## Sermon on the Level

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*Lord God – our prayer is that the written word will point us to Christ, the Living Word – so in his name we pray and for his voice we listen. Amen.*

Since Advent Sunday Luke has been our Gospel for this year and by the time we get to today's reading there is the unmistakable sense that things are going well for Jesus, the travelling Rabbi. He's drawing in the crowds. In last Sunday's reading there were so many by the shoreline that Jesus takes to an emergency pulpit in the form of Simon Peter's fishing boat. Today's reading once again says it was a 'full house'! For at least part of his ministry Jesus pulled in the crowds.

I went to Spurgeon's College in London, named after its founder, the celebrated Victorian preacher Charles Haddon Spurgeon. He ministered at The Elephant and Castle in South London, and for a time he was such a popular preacher that even though the Metropolitan Tabernacle seated over 5,000, you needed a ticket to get into the Sunday evening service!

Well, by Luke 6 Jesus is drawing quite a crowd.

This section of Luke may have reminded you as David read it to us of Matthew's Sermon on the Mount. It's undoubtedly from the same source. Matthew places this collection of Jesus' teaching on a mountain side. It was his way of saying; what you now read is as important as the original Ten Commandments which Moses received on the Mountain of Sinai.

But Luke's emphasis is different. Instead of the nine beatitudes of Matthew on the Mount, Luke gives us four beatitudes and four woes, all delivered on The Plain.

This level ground was a symbolic place. For Jews at that time level ground represented places of hardship, death, desolation and suffering. It's as if Luke places Jesus' words of hope and challenge into our everyday, ordinary lives. These words are to be lived out in the struggles we face, they are to be made real when life is humdrum and routine; not when we are up on a mountain with a wonderfully exhilarating view, but when we are on the level, plodding on through life.

Now, Jesus began that preaching ministry back in his home synagogue at Nazareth with, what people thought, was an audacious, even impertinent sermon. He read of God's mission to bring Good News to the poor and announced that was his mission too.

So, in the synagogue Jesus reads from the scriptures of a God who will bless the poor, and now as he preaches to yet another large crowd he once more makes it his core theme as he begins his sermon: blessed are the poor. Jesus rarely gets away from this theme, it

simply runs through his whole teaching.

Some commentators read these verses in Luke as The Promises of Reversal. You may be hungry, but you will be satisfied. You may be weeping but you will laugh. You may be poor, but soon the riches of the Kingdom of God will be yours.

Matthew tends to put a spiritual slant on poverty as he speaks of those who are Poor in Spirit, they will be blessed. Luke, however, seems much more down to earth, as befits, maybe, a preacher on the level. So, our church version of the bible, The Revised English, opens this sermon with the phrase: Blessed are you who are in need, the Kingdom of God is yours.

Poverty comes in many forms and guises.

We are rarely rich in every aspect of our lives.

Our text this morning touches on this because the third beatitude: Blessed are you who weep now, you will laugh is generally thought to refer to the angst and loneliness of growing older.

Even today one of the constant threats to good geriatric mental health is the isolation in which some older folk live. We might have paid off the mortgage and have the security of a good pension, but loneliness brings its own sense of impoverishment.

In Jesus day the second beatitude was only too real: Blessed are you who now go hungry, you will be satisfied. Almost every gospel story set in an Israeli village would have been one in which the people lived at the subsistence level of life dependant on the annual harvest and their own attempts at market gardening. All those references to twelve basketfuls being left over or so much wine that it never ran out were breath taking images of plenty where usually there was barely enough.

The first beatitude, usually translated: Blessed are you who are poor could mean so many things to Luke's first readers about 80AD.

Israel considered itself to be a nation impoverished of its identity because of Roman occupation, trodden down by an oppressive taxation system and dispirited now by the loss of the Temple and its treasured culture in 70AD.

The fourth beatitude seems to speak to the new congregations gathering in Jesus' name: Blessed are you when people hate you and ostracize you because of the Son of Man, you have a rich reward in heaven.

So these are the Promises of Reversal. Jesus is saying: It's not always going to be like this. God is looking out for you. Feel 'blessed' says Jesus, because whether you are poor, hungry, weeping or hated there is hope.

The second part of the Sermon on the Level then brings four woes. In a passage which really brings a word of judgement to the listener Jesus says; Woe to you who are rich, well fed, laughing and highly thought of. You've taken everything and given nothing so for you this happiness will be short lived.

I think we can see why Jesus' popularity didn't last! I sometimes think if he had been around today he'd so upset most congregations that he would never get the 2/3<sup>rd</sup> majority needed to be elected as any church's minister!

Now, don't you think our readings from the Christian and Jewish scriptures are well balanced this morning. The compilers of the lectionary showed a certain perception placing Jeremiah 17 next to Luke 7.

Jeremiah is the longest book in the Old Testament in that it has more words in the Hebrew text than any other. It's probably written by more than one author and is never set out in true chronological order. Often it seems a depressing read, but that would only be half the story from this morning's passage.

In Jeremiah 17 the prophet does warn against those who simply find their support in human institutions whilst walking away from God. These verses remind us of the four woes in Luke 7. Yet immediately after that Jeremiah paints a picture of the one who trusts in God and likens them, rather like Psalm 1, to a tree planted by streams of living water; and at that point it feels as if we are back in the four beatitudes of Luke.

So much for the bible study of today's passages. But don't we have to ask ourselves a very important question as we come to the end of today's sermon – as I listen to Jesus preaching on the level which group am I in? Those who receive words of blessing or woe.

I guess, in reality we flit between both.

Yet the truth is that in reading these words at the beginning of the 21<sup>st</sup> century we are a very different audience to the original listeners of the first.

We are, relatively speaking, probably wealthy, well fed, laughing and well thought of.

So, is there any hope or blessing for us as we leave church this morning or are we on the wrong side of this Sermon on the Level?

Well, I think there is a great deal of hope and purpose for us in today's reading.

Jesus says blessed are the poor, for the Kingdom of God is yours.

Now how is that Kingdom, God's rule made known amongst us? In a line of a much-loved hymn it is all about 'strength for today and bright hope for tomorrow'.

The Kingdom is about our eternal hope, about heaven and a life spent in the nearer

presence of a God of love. And yet, the Kingdom is now, and here and among us on the 17<sup>th</sup> February 2019. And it is made manifest in the love we find in families and amongst friends, in the justice we experience through our laws, in the compassion we meet in hospitals, and in the hope we encounter in the lives of women and men of conviction, good will and peace all around us, both inside and outside of the Church.

Just think of that diminutive tax official in Jericho by the name of Zacchaeus. He encounters the Kingdom of God in the person of Jesus Christ. Zacchaeus has put all his trust and effort into massing personal wealth. He spends time with Jesus. Jesus turns his world upside down and gives him new horizons. Maybe for the first time in a long time Zacchaeus started to interpret his world with compassion. So, after that personal renewal he plays his part in renewing his community. He shares his wealth, he starts caring for others.

Maybe we could rewrite today's beatitudes:

Blessed are those who are in need, for the kingdom will draw alongside you through the practical compassion of others.

Blessed are you who go hungry, for the kingdom will draw alongside you as your debts are rescinded by the West.

Blessed are you who weep, because the kingdom will draw alongside you in your old age by those in churches, families and communities who will always value you whether you reside at home or in care.

Blessed are you when people hate you, because the kingdom will draw alongside you as together with others who have a sense of God's love and justice, you stand against self-centred popularism and short term gratification.

Maybe as we hear Jesus' Sermon on the Level we begin to realise that perhaps we could be the answer to another person's prayer – and in that way we too will certainly be blessed even as we become a blessing to someone else.

Teresa of Avila put it beautifully when she wrote:

Christ has no body now but yours. No hands, no feet on earth but yours. Yours are the eyes through which he looks compassion on this world. Yours are the feet with which he walks to do good. Yours are the hands through which he blesses all the world. Yours are the hands, yours are the feet, yours are the eyes, you are his body. Christ has no body now on earth but yours.

This week, be blessed and be a blessing, in the name of The Father, Son and Holy Spirit. Amen.