

Sermon Epiphany 6C

Sunday 16th February 2025– Mosgiel

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

I am sure that you will have seen samplers before, examples of needlework exercises hung as decoration. A “bless this house,” a “Lord’s Prayer” and the Beatitudes are common examples. Well a version of the Beatitudes, not the one we just heard.

Some of you no doubt went to Nativity plays in the run up to Christmas, maybe once you were and angel, a shepherd, a wise man, Mary or Joseph. What is probably not apparent to people in the audience is that the Nativity Play seamlessly stitches together accounts from the Gospels of *Matthew* and *Luke*, though they were each crafted for different very different audiences initially.

Matthew and *Luke* both have a collection of sayings of Jesus known as the Beatitudes, but one version is significantly better known and that is the version in *Matthew*, the Sermon on the Mount – a name which is almost synonymous with the Beatitudes because we tend to overlook *Luke*. The version we heard today, *Luke*’s version, is often forgotten or glossed over. For a start *Luke*’s version is a sermon on the plain, not the mountain.

Why might that be? Put simply *Matthew*’s version is easier on us, it contains a series of blessings and unlike *Luke* presents no counter version, no “woes to”. It is all together more palatable, more comfortable, less of a challenge.

If you wanted to make a sampler based on *Luke*’s version it might read like this; “Religion should comfort the afflicted and afflict the comfortable.”

It is certainly the case that *Luke*’s version is not nearly as popular as *Matthew*’s with Christians in the developed world. It doesn’t take too long to work out why. In *Luke*’s version there is no escaping the fact that they say that when God hands out blessings, poor people will get more than rich people. They say that God discriminates between people on the basis of how well off they are here and now. And to make sure we don’t miss the point, *Luke*, unlike *Matthew*, includes the “Woes” that restate each beatitude in its opposite form: “Woe to you who are rich; Woe to you who have eaten your fill.” Perhaps it is not surprising that in the developing world, especially amongst what are sometimes called liberation theologians there is a markedly greater emphasis on *Luke*’s version than here.

The message is so stark and confronting that commentators wonder if *Matthew*’s version is proof that, right from the start, wealthier Christians were trying to water it down and spiritualise it so that they wouldn’t feel excluded by it. So instead of “Blessed are the poor”, we end up with “Blessed are the poor *in spirit*.” Instead of “Blessed are those who hunger,” we end up with “Blessed are those who hunger *for righteousness*.” Those more spiritualised versions are much easier to live with, because it is so much easier to convince yourself that they fit you.

I rather suspect, though, that *Luke* would have scoffed at such attempts to create some “wriggle room”. I suspect that he would have said that it is almost impossible to be simultaneously rich in things and poor in spirit. Maybe the mini-beatitudes in Jeremiah 17:5-10 are backing him up, even though at first glance they appear to have more in common with *Matthew*’s version. In Jeremiah it is just one woe and one blessing: “Woe to those who trust in human means and turn

away from the Lord,” and “Blessed are those who trust in the Lord.” It sounds like a spiritual point, but perhaps when we put it alongside Luke’s version we can see a significant truth. Perhaps there is a direct relationship between our wealth and our ability to trust God.

Jeremiah paints these graphic pictures of the contrasting consequences of trusting in wealth or trusting in God. Those who trust in their own resources or wealth are like plants trying to grow in the lifeless soil of a salt pan. They can sink their roots as deep as they like but it makes no difference; they still find nothing that will nourish them or give them any real life. By contrast people who trust in God are like trees planted near a river. Even if there is a serious drought, their roots still find plenty of nourishment in the water of life.

Now that doesn’t automatically take us straight back to Luke’s account. Maybe one can be rich and still have their trust in God rather than in their wealth? Maybe? Maybe, but when you think about it, it’s not that easy to imagine. I know that for me, anyway, if I’m facing some kind of problem and it is within my financial means to “buy” my way to a solution that is the first thing I’ll consider. It seems that it comes most naturally to trust in the most concrete source of support or help available. And that’s not usually God! For me (and I suspect for most of us) to learn to trust in God I need to make sure that I don’t have an easier alternative, because to learn to trust God I need to practice trusting God and I usually only practice when I am forced to by the lack of alternatives.

So I know that the fact that I am not often faced with an real discomfort or serious inconvenience due to lack of resources is actually an impediment to the development of real depth in my relationship with God because I can believe in my self sufficiency, in my ability to manage my life.

That’s why those taking religious vows in take a vow of poverty. It is not because poverty in itself is a good thing — Jesus makes that clear when his beatitudes add hunger and weeping as characteristics of poverty — it is because prosperity and personal ownership are highly addictive and the addiction to them is a major impediment to learning to trust God. In the monastic communities, the vow of poverty is not about total deprivation, it is about relinquishing personal ownership and making money a shared thing so that there is always accountability for its use. That way people voluntarily relinquish their own purchasing power and throw themselves back on God for their supports. In such a lifestyle, when you feel depressed you can’t respond by going out and buying stuff to make yourself feel better. You have to actually face the depressions and sink roots deeper into God in the search for living water. It is very much ‘the road less travelled’.

It is daunting and challenging, scary even, but Jesus’ words come in the middle of this vision of promise: those who had nothing are receiving the realm of God; those who were hungry are sitting down to a magnificent banquet; those who were weeping are singing and dancing and laughing. These images repeatedly characterise the descriptions of the future God is promising. It is a thrilling vision of justice and peace, of a world of joy and love; a world made new where suffering and crying and oppression will be gone forever. It’s a vision that fills us with hope and anticipation.

But, here in *Luke’s* account of the beatitudes, we are reminded that there are obstacles to inheriting this vision, and we are in one of the parts of the world for whom these obstacles are the biggest danger. Those who invested in money and things in this world may find that they are

so ill-equipped for the life of the Kingdom of God that they miss the boat entirely. God is clearly described by Jesus as playing favourites: God shows favouritism to those who have always missed out before.

Jesus says similar things numerous times. When it comes to the realm of God it is not so much a matter of how religious you are. Jesus told the religious people that many of those whom they regarded as sinners would have an easier time entering the Kingdom than them. God has seen that some people are always getting left out and decreed that in the Kingdom those people will get preferential treatment.

In global terms, we are among the lucky ones. Our level of prosperity and comfort puts most of us in the top 10 - 15 % of the world's people. It doesn't take too much looking at the spiritual state of our nation to realise the price we are paying for it. You can measure it either by the state of the churches or by the levels of psychological illness, family breakdown, suicide rates – and ours are amongst the very worst, and either way you'll not find a picture that suggests that prosperity has been an unqualified good for us.

"The writing is on the wall for you who are wealthy," says Jesus, "for you've had your goodies."

"Blessed are you who are poor now, for the realm of God will be yours."

It's tough blessing for us to hear, but it challenges us, it challenges our illusions of autonomy and it challenges us to embody compassion, to call to mind those who God puts first and act in such ways that we put them first and our society puts them first.

May fidelity to this vision of God for our world be as a blessing to us and for the world's healing.

May it be so among us Amen