

Luke 6

May the words of my mouth and the meditations of all our hearts be acceptable in your sight, our strength and our redeemer.

Let's think about the life you're dreaming of. What for you is the good life? Do you want to be popular? To have friends, family and work colleagues smile at you and wave at you in the street and think what a great person you are? Do you want to be successful? To reach the height of your profession, to excel in the work you've set your heart on? To be respected by everyone around you? Do you want to be relaxed? Lying back in a chair, laughing and joking without a care in the world? Dare I say it, do you want to be rich? Money can get us security, stability, fun and opportunities for ourselves and our families. For many people, including for me, these things often feel like the good life. We're keen to have them and get easily get grumpy when we don't. At least, that's true of me.

It's shocking therefore that this is exactly not how Jesus describes the good life. In today's Gospel reading, Jesus pronounces his blessing on various groups. It's a passage sometimes called the Beatitudes, which means the blessings.

Who does Jesus bless? Not the rich, the happy and the popular. In fact, in the second half of the passage he says woe to those people. He almost curses them, but he blesses the poor, the hungry, the sad and the persecuted. Blessing here isn't a particularly religious idea. The Greek word means "happy, prosperous, fortunate". Jesus is saying that the truly luckiest, most fortunate people, the people truly living the good life, are the poor, the hungry, the sad and the persecuted.

This is meant to shock us and confuse us. But he explains it. The poor are blessed, because theirs is the kingdom. The hungry are blessed because they will be satisfied. The sad are blessed, because they will laugh. It's interesting how Jesus seems to emphasise the timing. "Blessed are you who are hungry NOW, for you WILL be filled. Blessed are you who weep NOW, for you WILL laugh." The poor, the hungry and the weeping are blessed, because they won't be poor, hungry and weeping for ever. God is going to do something. God is going to make right all that is wrong in the world. The pain, the sorrow and the injustice which blights the lives of so many will one day be put right. God is making a world where there will be no poverty or hunger or sorrow, when all will have not just what they need but what they want. They'll be satisfied. People won't just be free from sorrow, they will actually laugh! It is a great future to look forward to.

It would be easy to stop the sermon here. Don't worry about the problems in your life. Don't worry about the problems in anyone else's life. Smile, be happy, because Jesus is going to make everything OK.

Unfortunately, that won't do. Why won't it do? Because it misses the blunt challenge of Jesus' words. Jesus does not say this will happen to everyone. Jesus does not say everyone will enjoy this blessing. He says the blessing is for the poor, the hungry, the sad and the persecuted and frighteningly he says woe to the rich, the full, the laughing and the respected, because they are not going to share in this blessing. It's a stark and shocking statement of the entry requirements to Jesus' kingdom. The entry requirements are hunger, poverty, sorrow and persecution.

Vienna is the city of balls. In order to get into a Viennese ball, you have to wear a formal evening suit or gown. To get admitted to Jesus' kingdom, it's the exact opposite. Fine clothes get you turned away at the door. This should trouble us.

First, logically, it seems to contradict what we see elsewhere in the Bible, that entry to the kingdom is through faith, through following Jesus.

Second, much more seriously and personally, this seems to exclude many of us, a lot of the time from the kingdom, because many of us are a lot of the time, rich, full, happy and respected. Of course, I don't know many of your circumstances. I do know, there are people here going through some very hard times. There are certainly people here who do more mourning than laughing, at least at the moment. There may well be people here who face negative career or social consequences for their faith. There are people here, whose finances are uncertain. In other words, there are people here who are poor, weeping and persecuted. To you, Jesus says, "blessed are you, for yours is the kingdom. Your difficult circumstances will one day be over. You will enter Jesus' kingdom of plenty and joy." But probably many of us at least on a global scale are more like the people Jesus says woe to.

On a global scale, we're rich. According to google, only about 60% of the world's population have a smartphone. So, if everyone in this church was the world, all of this side, the choir, Patrick and me and the altar party would have one, but this side wouldn't. So, if you have a smartphone, you're probably rich in global terms. 44% of the global population, so about the same proportion as those who don't have a smartphone, live on the equivalent of less than 6.85 dollars a day. Imagine trying to live in Vienna on just over six Euros a day. You can't manage rent or food, let alone anything else. So, I suggest that many of us, much of the time, are probably rich in global terms. Does this mean we're excluded from the kingdom?

Well, I don't think so. There are a number of rich Christians in the Bible and indeed elsewhere in Luke's Gospel, people like Zacchaeus, the wealthy tax collector who climbed a tree to see Jesus. I think the poverty Jesus talks about is metaphorical and

spiritual to some extent. The language of hunger and poverty is often used in Judaism of the time and elsewhere in Luke to mean spiritual poverty and hunger, people who want more and more of God and people who know they need God. Jesus is not saying that physical wealth and comfort exclude us from heaven.

But equally, I don't think we can blunt the harshness of Jesus' words too much.

This list of blessings by Jesus, the beatitudes as they're sometimes called, exist in two versions, one in Matthew's Gospel and one in Luke. The reasons why there are two and the history behind that is a question for a soundings session, but for now, let's just note God has given us two, both apostolic, both divinely inspired, both God's word. It wouldn't surprise me at all if Jesus said both using slightly different words on different occasions.

Matthew's version is much more well known, because it's much nicer and gentler on the rich. Matthew doesn't say "Blessed are you who are poor", he says "Blessed are the poor in spirit." Matthew doesn't include the list of woes, people who are decidedly not blessed. It's unsurprising that in the wealthy global north, we like Matthew's version much better. It give us, rich, happy people a get out clause. We can get to heaven with our wealth and our luxury by being poor in spirit. Matthew's version is the basis of many songs and bits of artwork and handicraft, but I've never seen anyone make a pretty piece of calligraphy or needlepoint out of Luke's version. But Luke's version is in the Bible too and, like it or not, Luke's version is the reading for today in the lectionary, the system of readings used by almost the entire western church.

Luke strongly emphasises the fact that poverty is what gets you into heaven and wealth excludes you. Poverty might be a metaphor for following Jesus, a word picture of following Jesus, but word pictures and metaphors work because they're like the real thing. When I say "my eyes light up when I see my wife", I don't mean that I have electric light-bulbs in my head, but I do mean that my facial expression changes. If it doesn't, the word picture is meaningless.

Following Jesus is meant to be like poverty and hunger and suffering. So, what does that mean?

Well, wealth brings self-sufficiency, and poverty brings dependence on God. People who don't know where their daily bread is coming from, people who live on less than that 6.85 per day, probably pray for their daily bread more than people who don't have to worry about it. People who have no worries about what they will eat or what they will wear probably find it quite easy to go through life without thinking of God. And if you go through life without thinking of God, you're probably not really following Jesus. Following Jesus, means depending on God for all your needs every day, which is something people without money know very well.

Jesus also says that those who weep are blessed. People who weep learn patience. If our daily lives are sorrowful, if we've lost things that are very dear to us and miss them, we have little choice but to learn to trust God and keep going day by day, with faith that it will somehow get better. That is what following Jesus is like. Following Jesus is keeping going trusting God for the future when you don't know how or when things will change. If your life is a barrel of laughs, that's hard to learn.

Then persecution. People who are persecuted, who are mocked and sneered at for their faith rarely think much of themselves. They're not the sort of people who say "look at me, I'm brilliant." That is following Jesus. Following Jesus is about thinking little of ourselves. When people respect us, when people compliment us, when people tell us we're wonderful, it's very easy to believe it. It's very easy to think we are wonderful and that is not following Jesus.

If your life is full of money and laughter, well, you might be following Jesus, but everything about your lifestyle is making that more difficult.

Of course, for those of us that are rich and happy and respected, it's not just about learning the lessons of our brothers and sisters who struggle with money or reputation or emotional well-being; it's also about showing solidarity. If Jesus blesses the poor and the suffering, then surely we're called to do the same. That might well mean generous giving, of our money, our love, our emotions. It might also mean challenging the systems and structures that enable global poverty.

As we do that, of course, we will be less rich, less happy, less respected. We will live in less luxury if we've been financially generous to others. If we spend an evening chatting with someone going through a really hard time, we'll probably be less full of laughter at the end of it. If we associate with those our society is uninterested in, then our reputations might suffer. But perhaps that is good. Jesus offers his kingdom to the poor, the hungry, the sad and the persecuted. So, the more we are like them, the better. We become more and more the people who will receive the kingdom.

So, if you are struggling with money, struggling with emotional darkness, struggling with being mocked and persecuted by others, I am so sorry. Do talk to someone you know in the church. Do talk to me or Patrick. We may not be able to do much practically, but we'll do what we can. At the very least, we'd love to pray for you. Also, do be encouraged your struggles won't be for ever. If you're following Jesus, yours is the kingdom. Jesus is preparing a kingdom of plenty and joy for the poor and the struggling.

But if you are rich, laughing and honoured by your society and you want to follow Jesus and inherit his kingdom, then what you are called to do is live in solidarity with

the poor, the hungry, the sad and the persecuted and embrace the humility and patience and dependence on God which the poor and the suffering teach us.