

A Sermon by Canon Maggie Guite (at Horseheath)

Proper 2 Year C

17 February 2019

Jeremiah 17.5-10, Psalm 1, Luke 6.17-26

Blessed are the poor

Today's Gospel reading comes as rather a shock to most of us, I think. We very rarely hear it read in church, and we can recognise it as being the same – yet somehow very different – from the Beatitudes of Jesus we much more often hear from St Matthew's Gospel, Chapter 5. Just a reminder (though I'm sure you scarcely need it) . The words which begin: *'Blessed are the poor in Spirit, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven...'*

Well, here the words are much more direct and addressed to the crowd *'Blessed are you who are poor...hungry now , weeping now ...'*; they're not so 'spiritual' and holy –sounding,, they're delivered on a level place – a 'plain' – and not on a mount; and, most shockingly of all, they're accompanied by a series of woes: *'Woe to you who are rich...who are full now...who are laughing now...'* It sounds as though Jesus is a firebrand whipping the people up about economic unfairness – as though he's saying, 'God is the friend of the poor and the enemy of the rich. That's pretty uncomfortable stuff for those of us who are

comfortably off – as we all are, if we compare ourselves with the majority of people in the world; it sounds as though Jesus may be haranguing us about our dinners, our cars, our houses , our salaries and our pensions. What are we to think about this Gospel passage?

One way of wriggling out might be to say that Luke's got it wrong: Jesus is more likely to have preached the Beatitudes as we get them from the sermon on the Mount in Matthew's Gospel than this much more literalistic speech about real poverty, real hunger, real weeping... with the frightening woes for those who enjoy their opposites Or perhaps we might say that he gave both sermons to different people on different occasions, for particular purposes. Maybe he had particular rich people in mind, particular well-fed souls, particular people who were laughing and making a mockery of the things of God...? Maybe...maybe.

But when I was studying theology, we were taught that scholars thought that were there were two versions of what look very much like the same sayings, they do probably both originate from a memory of the same event, or the same speech. And perhaps one of the versions got altered more than the other did before it was written down in the Gospel. And here's the rub – the scholars suggested that alterations, modifications, to the sayings of Jesus, were much more likely to be in the direction of making them 'softer' rather than 'harder' – more palatable, rather than more difficult to

swallow. Which, when applied to this passage might tend to suggest that Luke's version of the blessings Jesus pronounced could in fact be closer to his original words than Matthew's! But, of course, we can't exactly know. There was quite a period of time, quite a process of oral and then of written passing-on of Jesus' words before we finally got the Gospels we have today. People will have told them and remembered them in different ways in different places where there were Christians gathering together around the Mediterranean world – they may have put their own 'spin' on them, because of what was happening around them. So, did Jesus sit on a mountain and say '*Blessed are the poor in spirit..*', or did he stand on a plain and say, '*Blessed are you who are poor*' (and then '*Woe to you who are rich*')? We shall never know – well, not in this life, anyway. But, what we do know is that the Church of God, guided by the Holy Spirit, recognised both Matthew and Luke's Gospels as 'Scripture' – able to give us true insight into Jesus, his life and teaching, his death and resurrection, and what it all means to us.

So we have to live with, and ponder, the less easy version of the beatitudes which we heard today from St Luke's Gospel with equal seriousness alongside the lovely words we almost certainly know better from St Matthew's Sermon on the Mount.

And both sets of Beatitudes share this in common – they point to the future: '*Blessed are you who are poor,*

hungry, weeping...because yours is the kingdom of the God, you will be filled, you will laugh....' The earliest Christians would have expected all this to become true when Jesus came again – very soon – and reigned as the Messiah-king from Jerusalem, turning the world upside down. And poor Christians – and there were many of them, some of them slaves, even ...might have rather relished the thought that the rich would get their come-uppance.

But, of course, there were rich Christians, too – there's plenty of evidence of that both in the Gospels and in the Letters of Paul: they will have had to ponder what the blessings and woes found in St Luke's Gospel would mean for them...just as we do.

We, of course, live long after the time of the earliest Christians: when we look to the future in which Jesus' words of blessing or woe will be fulfilled, we look towards our own resurrection life, after we leave this world – not so much to a changed world-order when Jesus has 'come again' to reign in Jerusalem. But of course, in this context, the accusation comes in that the words of the Gospel – the words of blessing for the poor, the hungry and the wretched – are just a promise of 'pie in the sky when you die' – while the woes are just empty threats of punishment after death, in a hell hardly anyone believes in any more.

I want to say, seriously, though, that we shouldn't let these accusations put us off taking Jesus' words seriously. Of course, 'pie in the sky when you die' has been used as a way of keeping people in line – stopping them from challenging injustice and changing the world for the better – and that's quite wrong. But I want to say that, on the contrary, a vivid sense of resurrection life, of the judgement of God when all motives will be revealed and injustice shown up for what it is – should motivate us strongly to be putting things right now, sharing and caring, and trying to overcome the gulf between rich and poor in whatever way we can. Because God has revealed in Jesus that he cares deeply about it. It's not just in today's Gospel passage from St Luke – think of the parable of the rich man and Lazarus (also found in St Luke's gospel), or the story of the rich young man instructed to sell his goods and give to the poor, found in the first three Gospels, or Jesus' words about how you can't serve God and Mammon, from the sermon on the Mount - there's no getting away from the fact that Jesus had stark and challenging things to say in this area. Or as, St Paul put it, '*The love of money is the root of all evil...*' Christians in all ages are called to take God's concerns about riches and poverty seriously, even though in all ages there have been those who've been tempted to gloss them over.

Now, there are sensible discussions to be had about what God's revealed concerns on these matters mean to us in practical terms. Of course there are.. As many

people have said, it wouldn't necessarily do any good to anyone else if we all simply went out of church and gave up our homes, our pensions and investments, and went to live on the streets... Nor does being really poor, really hungry, really destitute, whether in this country or overseas, necessarily feel particularly blessed, or lead to what looks like sanctity (although it is true, that where there is faith, it's often the poorest, and the most insecure Christian communities who seem to exude most joy in the Gospel, most sacrificial generosity towards others, most true reliance on God and closeness to him; just as it was St Francis, the man who threw off his rich clothes and went to live in hovels and among the lepers, who was often found singing with joy - so much that he was called 'God's troubadour').

It's all too long a discussion to get into; we have to ponder in our own hearts, each of us, what God's concerns about wealth and poverty mean to us. But I seriously believe the mind of God should show in our lives in *some* practical and visible way. And I want to end by making one small suggestion as to a difference it can make to all of us here today: and it's to do with the word 'blessed'; because 'blessed' means – in European languages at least –not only someone who's receiving God's blessings, but also someone who is spoken well of. In Latin, to bless is *bene dicere* – to speak well. So when you bless someone, you speak good things over them, you call down good things for them: when you

bless God, you speak well of him in praising and thanking him; and I want to suggest that one distinctive thing we can do as Christians who aren't so poor, is to *speak well* of the poor – not just in the sense of praying for them and their needs, but also, in the very plain sense of speaking well of the poor when others speak ill of them. It's very tempting – and many in our society do it – to feel challenged by poverty when you see it, and distinctly uncomfortable. Think how you feel when you see someone sleeping in a shop doorway. To try and escape the discomfort, many turn to blaming poor people, hungry people, for their own suffering: you know what I mean. The names people are called – 'scroungers', 'layabouts', 'losers' ; or the theories that are advanced for the poverty we see, both in this country and abroad : 'They have too many children', 'they're feckless, they're addicts' : even. 'well, they choose to live like that'. That's not speaking well of the poor. As Christians who believe that Jesus called poor people 'blessed', we can be determined not to entertain such thoughts, if they slip into our heads and certainly not to utter them. We can challenge ill-speaking, when we hear it from other people. What we learn from our faith is this : each person is precious, made in the image of God and loved by him; those who are poor, hungry, weeping and wretched – Jesus called them blessed. They have a special place in God's heart. This is the perspective the Gospel teaches us, and it's a perspective we can live by and promote.

If we adopt this perspective, then other things may become clear, too; and if we add to it the perspective of our resurrection hope - of God's promise to set things right when we see him face to face – then it may become even clearer how we should live, what we should do, what choices we should each of us make in his world of such inequality.