

 *St Paul's Anglican Parish of Ipswich*  
**SUNDAY SERMON**

*Delivered by Rev'd Michele Knight on the 17th February 2019*

Living Lord; open our hearts to your word - a word that passes swiftly and faithfully from the ear to the heart, from the heart to the life. Amen

Last week, when I was talking with some of my friends about preaching on the 'Beatitudes & Woes' reading today they said "well that won't be too hard!", I have to say it would be easy to get up here and talk about how, if we want to be happy all we have to do is to give away materialism, dedicate ourselves to the poor and to bravely 'turn the other cheek' when people are mean to us and reject all that we believe in. It would be easy to stand here and condemn those who are affluent, those who seem blessed by good fortune, enjoy a good life and are well respected in the community. In fact it might even be seen by some as being typically Australian, in that we often love to condemn and 'pull down' those who we consider to be 'tall poppies'. But I don't think that this is really the point of our Gospel today and I don't think that this is the message Jesus is meaning us to take from it.

So what on earth is it all about? Blessed are the poor? Happy are the hungry? Fortunate are the tearful? These blessings don't seem to be very special at all and don't know about you, but I have never heard anybody say "isn't this great - I'm starving!" I have never seen a person crying their heart out while laughing joyfully. Have you? Why would Jesus say this? What person would believe it?

It's not hard to see why just a couple of weeks ago our readings told of the people of Nazareth wanting to throw Jesus off a cliff!! Jesus seemed to have a knack of being able to turn things on their heads - think of the young rich man he told to go and sell everything he owned, or when he told Peter he would deny even knowing him or even last week when he told the fishermen who had worked all night for nothing to go out and give it another try - only to have catch some many fish that they were nearly capsized.

Perhaps if we look at the other readings today we might find clue as to how we could interpret them. As first glance the readings do not seem to have any interconnection but actually three of the four readings today talk about being blessed.

To begin to understand this reading I think it's important to look at the cultural context of the words 'blessed, rich and poor'. In the Jewish traditions of Jesus' time, the handing on of a blessing meant the passing down of an inheritance - a birthright - a gift - it was a time for rejoicing.

The first century society understood the meaning and causes of poverty quite differently from the way we do. In those times, a man became rich (and it was always a man) because he had the power and social position to take what he wanted from those who were weaker and unable to defend themselves. He was considered to be blessed. The poor, the orphaned and the widowed on the other hand were usually spoken of together as sharing a common sense of powerlessness or even wretchedness. The orphan had no adult to protect their interests, the widow, even if she was very rich, but had no son, had no one to protect her and was therefore vulnerable to the greed of the socially powerful. So if you were in a position of power in the 1st century you could accumulate vast wealth at the expense of who were

considered socially unfortunate or poor. . In those days, power led to wealth. Maybe we are now starting to get a glimpse of what Jesus is on about.

Although this could be considered to be true today, I believe there is a subtle difference in how we understand the words blessed, rich and poor in today's culture. In the modern Western world, when so many of us are wealthy by world standards, it seems that wealth alone is not enough. In many circumstances in today's world, Power seems to be the ultimate goal. It can seem that wealth is often manipulated as a means to achieve ultimate power, unlike the reverse as it was in the 1st century. It sometimes seems that if you have enough money you can make just about anything happen. You only have to look at how we are currently being bombarded by ads on our TVs, costing millions of dollars, ads whose ultimate aim is to gain political power for a few very wealthy people. Likewise in the US this week we have seen a very wealthy President threaten and manipulate that country's political and legal systems by declaring a State of Emergency so as to allow him to access funds from other parts of the government, without the approval of Congress. Again it would seem that the goal of this decision is to ensure re-election and therefore ultimate power. It seems to me that although the immediate understanding of wealth and power may have reversed, the end result is probably going to be the same.

So into the middle of all this explodes today's Gospel. This is Luke's version of the 'Sermon on the Mount' which we read about in Matthew's Gospel. Matthew places Jesus on top of a mountain, sitting down, a position which indicated authority, teaching his disciples, a select few. Luke has him coming down onto the plain, standing among a great crowd from all over the place. In doing this Luke is implying that what Jesus is about to tell them does not apply to a select few, but to everyone - to all "who had come to hear him and be healed" (v18). Jesus puts a whole new light on everything which both the first century Palestinians, and those of us living in the twenty-first, understand as being socially acceptable. It's a radical new theme -the disadvantaged will be rewarded. This was, and is, a bit hard to swallow. This passage isn't meant to be easy listening. Unless we are the poor, or the hungry, or those in mourning, it's meant to make us feel uncomfortable. Jesus is clearly referring to real-life conditions: poverty and its consequences of hunger, misfortune and persecution; wealth and its repercussions of satisfaction, laughter and praises. It is also clear that in confronting the powerful people of his time, Jesus is challenging them to think of the 'bigger picture'; to think of how their attitudes to wealth and power will impact on their relationship with God. This is true also today. Jesus is telling us it's not just about money, possessions or power. He is calling us to get our priorities straight. Now don't get me wrong. I'm a middle class Australian. I am not anti-materialistic. There is nothing essentially evil in being rich or sharing laughter; likewise there is nothing deeply wonderful about poverty or grieving. What Jesus is trying to say is that when people are living with trauma, the blessings they receive come because in their time of trial they turn to God, and in seeking God, they find God. By contrast God can do little for those who don't move out of their comfort zone, who are self-satisfied, self-seeking and self centred, who depend on their own wealth and abilities, insulating themselves against the poverty which surrounds them, using their wealth to gain power over others, turning their backs on the love and peace God offers.

The reading from the book of the prophet Jeremiah curses the person who trusts in human beings, mere mortals, and blesses the person who trusts in God. The imagery is clear in both the Hebrew scripture and the Psalm. Those who look to the things of the earth become like dry scrub in the desert or chaff which they be scattered by the wind, while those who trust in God are like trees planted close to water, remaining fruitful whatever comes, even drought.

This is clearly what underlies the 'beatitudes and woes' of today's gospel. We live in a world in which, increasingly, people are placing their trust in material things, and increasingly, we meet people who are unhappy, unsatisfied with life and yearning for something real and fulfilling. Most of us understand that money, and the things it can buy, does not bring true happiness. Deep happiness has to do with invisible

qualities like loving family, loving friends, loving God - invisible qualities not related to material possessions.

In the Gospel, Jesus is not condemning being well off. He is saying that if that power and wealth comes at the expense of others, it will ultimately lead to a break in relationship with God and therefore unhappiness. Jesus blesses those who put their trust in God. It is a call to change our attitudes and situation in history, our aspirations and plans in view of the future kingdom that Jesus proclaims as already present and at work. As Paul tells the Corinthians (1 Cor 15:17), faith in the resurrection of Jesus, without which our faith would be futile, is opening up human existence to a horizon of hope which transcends 'this life' (v 19). It gives us with a new key to understand and face situations and life, to decide where we will place our ultimate trust. Will we trust in "mere mortals and make mere flesh our strength" or will we "trust in the Lord" as Jeremiah advises. It is a message to us about putting everything the right way around, about focussing on what God wants for us.

I'd like to finish with a story about Two Seas I found many years ago which I think reflects our readings today.

There are two seas in Palestine. One is fresh, and fish are in it. Splashes of green adorn its banks. Trees spread their branches over it and stretch out their thirsty roots to sip of its healing waters. Along its shores the children play. The River Jordan makes this sea with sparkling water from the hills. So it laughs in the sunshine. And men build their houses near to it, and birds their nests; and every kind of life is happier because it is there.

The river flows on south into another sea. Here is no splash of fish, no fluttering leaf, no song of birds, no children's laughter. Travellers choose another route, unless on urgent business. The air hangs heavy above its water, and neither man nor beast nor fowl will drink.

What makes this mighty difference in these neighbour seas? Not the river Jordan. It empties the same good water into both. Not the soil in which they lie, not the country about.

This is the difference. The Sea of Galilee receives but does not keep the Jordan. For every drop that flows into it another drop flows out. The giving and receiving go on in equal measure.

The other sea is shrewder, hoarding its income jealously. It will not be tempted into any generous impulse. Every drop it gets, it keeps.

The Sea of Galilee gives and lives. This other sea gives nothing. It is named The Dead.