

Third Sunday before Lent 2019 (17th January): Luke 6:20-26; 1 Cor.15:12-18

Blessed are you who are poor, for yours is the kingdom of God

Our Gospel reading this morning was St. Luke's version of the beginning of the Sermon on the Mount, often known as the Beatitudes – from the Latin *beati*, for blessed. Many of you will know the rather longer version in Saint Matthew – something Jesus said on a similar occasion but different occasion, perhaps.

What you might *not* know is that we have evidence also of a third version: just discovered in the last few months on a fragment of ancient manuscript, preserved in one of those stone jars that pop up occasionally in Palestine. It has been designated by New Testament scholarship as *Codex Ofstedicus*, and it goes like this:

Jesus said:

Blessed are the poor in spirit.

Blessed are the meek.

Blessed are they that mourn.

Blessed are the merciful.

Blessed are they that thirst for justice.

Blessed are you when you suffer.

Be glad and rejoice, for your reward is great in Heaven."

So far, so familiar: now comes the new material:

And then Simon Peter said, "Are we supposed to know this?"

And Andrew said, "Do we have to write this down?"

And James said, "Will we have a test on this?"

And Philip said, "What came after 'poor' again?"

And Bartholomew said, "Do we have to hand this in?"

And John said, "The other disciples didn't have to do this!"

And Matthew said, "Can I go to the toilet?"

And Judas said, "What does this have to do with real life?"

And then one of the Pharisees who was present asked to see Jesus' Lesson Plan and enquired of him, "Where are your learning objectives and differentiation and extension?"

And Jesus wept.

Thus ends *Codex Ofstedicus*.

But back to Luke, and the very first of his Beatitudes: *Blessed are you poor, for yours is the kingdom of God*. What does Jesus mean?

Well firstly, who are poor? Of course they're the poor in the most straightforward sense, those who have very little money, those who are constantly struggling just to survive. But it doesn't take long either reading Luke's Gospel, or just living your life, to realise that there are lots of other ways to be poor too. Remember the story of Zacchaeus, the tax collector up the tree? He had lots of money, but was truly poor – cut off from his people, despised and self-despising. And by the end of the story, truly blessed, truly in God's kingdom.

Poverty is not just about money: it's about whatever wrecks a human being, whatever leaves us alone, vulnerable, and afraid. The guilty are poor. The bereaved are poor. The emotionally crippled are poor.

And blessed are you poor, because yours is the kingdom of God. Not, please note, because there is something really wonderful about you, or about being poor. There's isn't. God didn't make us to be poor. And being poor, in whatever way, is disaster, the world gone wrong.

But blessed are you poor, because God is making a new world, where the poor are made rich and the broken put back together again. This is the Gospel: what happened in Jesus means that this whole broken world is going to be reborn. Because of Jesus all the lives that have been wrecked, can be healed. All those who have been left outside, can be brought in. Our collective story, the human story, ends in love, and joy, and peace. And each individual's story, we dare to trust, because of Jesus, can end there too. St. Paul says, towards the end of the chapter we read from this morning, that human beings are like seeds. We are growing into something, we have a destiny. Well, no matter how broken we are now, the Gospel is that because of Jesus our destiny is stupendous beauty and joy. Because of the resurrection, that is where each of us is headed. Words fail to describe the glory of it, we see it only dimly, as in a mirror – but one day, we shall see clearly, face to face.

Well, you might say, this is just pie-in-the-sky when you die: don't worry about being poor now, and don't worry about other people being poor now, don't try too hard to change anything, because everyone will be all right in Heaven. That's how Christians have justified all sorts of oppression to themselves, and its one reason why so many people are rather suspicious of the Gospel. They'd rather work on changing life before death, than wait for consolation prizes afterwards.

To which two things must be said in response. Number one, even the most brilliant, comprehensive kind of social action – the most astonishing charity, the most radical political action – even that, if we ever got it, couldn't deliver what Christians hope for. It could not reach into the depths of the heart and let people forgive others and, perhaps even more radically, themselves. And it could not reach into the depths of the grave to raise the dead. We hope for a healing far beyond all human power: the Kingdom of God is about more than social progress. Social progress bears about the same relation to the Kingdom as candlelight does to the sun. And blessed are the poor because they are headed into the sunlight.

But number two: God's kingdom has its outposts, its embassies and its ambassadors. It is not here yet, but we are: its citizens, its people, representing it in a strange land. So blessed are the poor, because they live in a world with a church – with people who have decided to act as if the Gospel is true, as if every single person they meet is intended by God for immortal splendour. Blessed are those who struggle to feed themselves, blessed are those crippled by fear and guilt, blessed are those broken by sorrow, blessed is everyone who is struggling because here there are people who will look at you like God does: who will love you and give themselves for you, who will give you strength and carry you into the sunlight. We're not very good at it, but that's why we're here. That's why we resource the foodbank, that's why we care for the bereaved, that's why we run a youth club for tricky teenagers, that's why we do it all, because that's what a church is for – to tell people this Gospel in word and in deed: that because of Jesus, no-one going under. We shall all reach the promised Land. Blessed are you poor, because here comes the church.

And lastly, blessed are you poor, because while there is nothing good about poverty, it does at least avoid some of the dangers which come with being rich. Being rich, the Bible says again and again, is *dangerous*. And if poverty isn't only about money, neither is being rich. The rich are also the competent, the successful, the used to getting their own way – those who have never been broken. And they, say the Gospel, are in serious trouble. Because only those who know what it is to be broken are in a position to receive God's help. There's a reason the central moment of our religion is coming to the altar to receive bread and wine. You hold out *empty hands*, and you wait for something to be put in them. God comes to you as a gift, not as something you already have, something you can do for yourself. So if you are rich, beware. If it's in the straightforward sense of having lots of money, practice radical generosity ... give, give and give again. If it's in broader sense of success, skill, competence, security ... well, it can be even harder. But you, desperately, need to be open to those moments when life itself teaches you how superficial all that is: you need to have the courage to not run away, but to stay in your failure, your sadness, your mortality. Only when you embrace your poverty can you start to know blessedness. Only when your hands are empty can you receive.

And knowing that: blessed are you poor, because yours is the Kingdom of God.

Amen.