

Epiphany 6 Luke 6:17-26

Wherever there is an encounter which involves a number of people who go on to reflect on their experience, we can guarantee there will be differences in the descriptions they give of the same event. Imagine attending a special event or listening to a public speaker give a talk. If you were asked to describe what was said afterwards do you think you would remember the talk word for word? Probably not, and even more likely, if the person standing next to you was asked the same questions, they would probably give a completely different answer. This is not because you or the other person is wrong but rather because we can only take on so much information and what we absorb in such a circumstance will be dependent on our own background, interests, motivations and experience.

In today's gospel reading we have a passage that sounds familiar but not quite the same as something we have seen elsewhere. The words attributed to Jesus are better known as the beatitudes but in Luke's gospel they are not quite the same as in the better remembered description in Matthew's gospel. In Matthew's version of events Jesus tells the crowd who will be blessed – it will be the poor, the meek the peacemakers and so on. There is a positive message for each of the downtrodden groups in society that in God their sadness and frustrations will be resolved.

In Luke's account, however, as we just heard, the message is one of blessings and woes which is far more pointed. In the beatitudes from Matthew's gospel it is implied that if these people will be blessed, then there are others who will not be blessed because they do not fit the categories, but in Luke's account the woes are spelt out in no uncertain terms and it is a confronting message.

The world would have us believe that in order to be winning at life we should be happy, wealthy, successful at our work, have the material things we desire, and enjoy a good reputation amongst our peers. What the world would have us avoid is poverty, hunger, sadness, reliance on other people and putting ourselves in a situation where we are disliked or excluded by our peers. Jesus, however, in his list of blessings and woes turns this received wisdom on its head. Those the world shuns are those lining up for the greatest blessings, those the world loves can expect no such rewards as they have already received their just desserts.

Have a think about how that makes you feel, it truly is challenging. How many of us would consider ourselves poor when statistically over half of the global population lives on less than \$2.50 per day and 80% live on less than \$10 per day? How many of us regularly experience hunger? Who among us lives in a place of regularly being hated by all those around them? Far more likely, we are reasonably able to live, perhaps not extravagantly, but managing. Mostly we have friends and loved ones in our lives that bring joy and cause us to be spoken of well. So are we to expect our woes to come upon us as Jesus promised?

It is not possible to fully understand what Jesus is warning us of all of the time, but in this case, as with most of Jesus' teachings, it is possible to go beneath the surface for a deeper understanding. In other teachings Jesus reassured his followers that he came to bring joy for us, that we might live lives to the full, so the idea that we take this teaching as a command to be miserable now in order to receive blessings later doesn't quite work. Furthermore, this teaching can be and has been used to subjugate and abuse those who are struggling in society. There have been Christian leaders responsible for a doctrine of encouraging the poor to stay poor and the hungry to continue to go without in order to ensure their receipt of the many blessings promised by Jesus in the next life. While that looks like a biblical position, when the leader suggesting it is in fact living a comfortable life while preaching poverty to others, something has gone very wrong indeed.

So a far more reasoned response to a passage such as this is to take it in context with the rest of Jesus' teaching and to ask ourselves, what does Jesus want me to learn from this? The answer is two-fold. First Jesus is reassuring us that God's kingdom is not like the world where money, status, education and constant happiness are the only indicators of a life well lived. That is wonderful news because we all know how fleeting such things can be. Our worth is not bound up in the things around us but in the person we are inside. We should know that if we are struggling with sadness, or hunger, or poverty or insults and unkindness from others, we continue to be loved and valued children of God and our blessings will abound.

In contrast, we learn from this passage that where we find ourselves satisfied and content, taking credit for our wonderful circumstances, we have forgotten God and as such our own circumstance will be our reward. It is not so much that each time we are happy we can expect woes to befall us, rather that when our own happiness is all we seek, we have lost sight of God's blessings. In the same way it is not so much that Jesus doesn't want us to eat so that we might remain hungry, but rather when the pursuit of our own comfort and material treasures is all consuming, we will be out of reach of God's blessings.

God can only bless those who are reliant on God, those willing to put aside selfishness and self-promotion, and instead trust God's plan and path for them. When we do that, we recognise what is really important in our lives and it isn't just looking out for ourselves. Once we recognise where the blessings of God are found, we are also drawn to pay attention to the hungry, poor and marginalised. If we are to be attracted to Christ, we must know where to look and Jesus is telling us that it won't be where the world might expect.

If we are to be inspired by today's reading, then we will necessarily be challenged by it. No one said living a Christian life would be easy, but it is worth it! To seek to be blessed by God, we must begin to see the world as God sees the world. We should be able to recognise the worth of those around us even if they are being ignored by the world. We should be looking for opportunities to trust and follow the Holy Spirit rather than forging our own path. God's blessings are poured on those who allow themselves to be vulnerable and reliant on God, rather than trying always to be masters of our own destiny, and in all things, may we ever hold central our love of God and love for our neighbour – just as Jesus taught us.