

Turning the world upside down by Rev John Castle

A sermon given on Sunday 13th February 2022
at St Michael's Church, Sandhurst

Readings: Luke 6:17-26

Year C, Proper 2

Introduction: Expectations

I wonder what you are looking for from God today? We come to church to worship God and to remind ourselves that we belong together as God's family. But we also come with expectations about what we might receive from God. We may be aware of these expectations, or they may be unconscious.

So how about you? Have you come to church to be encouraged, consoled, comforted, inspired, empowered, or challenged? Take a moment now to ask yourself what you are hoping for from God today.

Turning the world upside down

Today we are looking at some well-known sayings of Jesus, known as the Beatitudes, but not in the version you may know best, which is the one in Matthew chapter 5, where we find 9 blessings from the mouth of Jesus. In Luke's version, there are only 4 sayings about those who are blessed, and Jesus matches them with 4 warnings, each beginning with the words "Woe to you".

This passage is the beginning of a collection of Jesus' sayings, which we will be continuing to explore over the next two

weeks. When I looked at these passages recently, I came up with the title for this sermon “Turning the world upside down”. It is a phrase that was used in a derogatory sense of Paul and Silas when they visited Thessalonica. Their enemies said, “These people who have been turning the world upside down have come here also.”¹ The gospel message was seen as disruptive, challenging people’s pre-existing beliefs and causing controversy. So I’d like you to turn to the people next to you and share what you think about this phrase “turning the world upside down”. What could be positive or negative about this phrase? Is this how you see the Christian faith?

A call for change

I think one thing we can agree on is that the phrase “turning the world upside down” implies change – whether for better or worse. And I hope we’d all agree that when God wants to change things, it must be for the better. That doesn’t mean that it will be easy.

Sometimes we welcome change, in fact we may be hoping for it, calling for it, working for it. One recent example has been the easing of Covid restrictions, and the restoration of freedoms to socialise and visit people, which were taken away during the worst part of the pandemic. Most of us, I’m sure, have welcomed these changes. But for others, they have caused greater anxiety about catching Covid and becoming ill.

¹ Acts 17:6 NRSV

Sometimes we know we need to change, but we're reluctant to take the actions that are needed in order for change to happen. Our health is a classic example of this. We may realise that we need to eat less, take more exercise, give up smoking or reduce our alcohol consumption, but actually doing it can be hard, because we don't want to give up something we enjoy, or have got used to.

Another topical example is climate change. We've heard that we'll only have a chance of reducing carbon emissions to zero if we eat a lot less meat, and if we stop driving petrol or diesel cars. Of course, success also depends massively on governments, manufacturers, retailers and other companies to make changes. But are we actually committed to changing our own lifestyles to help save the planet? What changes have you actually made in the past 2 years to help tackle climate change?

The Christian message is about change. In chapter 3 of Luke's gospel we see John the Baptist calling people to repent of their sins. He was clear that this was not about saying sorry, being forgiven and then carrying on as before. When people asked him what they should do, he said that those with two coats must give one to someone who has none, and those with food must share it. Tax collectors must stop cheating people, soldiers must stop using their power to extort money from others and be satisfied with their wages.²

When Jesus comes to Nazareth in chapter 4, he reads from the book of the prophet Isaiah:

² Luke 3:10-14

The Spirit of the Lord is upon me,
because he has anointed me
to bring good news to the poor.
He has sent me to proclaim release to the captives
and recovery of sight to the blind,
to let the oppressed go free,
to proclaim the year of the Lord's favour.'³

Jesus comes to bring hope and freedom, and that means transformation. This is a challenge to the status quo. It's a refusal to accept poverty and oppression. Things don't have to continue the way they are. God wants to save us from the consequences of pride, greed and complacency.

This echoes the clear, subversive message of Mary's Song, the Magnificat. Mary rejoices because God has chosen her, an ordinary, humble girl, to be the mother of his Son. She sees this as an example of God's desire to lift up the lowly and bring down the proud, to fill the hungry but send the rich away empty.⁴ You might call it God's "levelling up" agenda.

If Mary is right (and it's implied that Luke thinks she is), then God is not happy with the status quo. Salvation isn't just about individuals being forgiven and going to heaven. God has a much bigger plan for the world, in which people are saved from all kinds of oppression – spiritual, material, emotional, social. When Christians have understood this, they have always acted in practical ways. The first hospitals were run by monasteries. Primary schools, like St Michael's

³ Luke 4:18-19 NRSV

⁴ Luke 1:46-55

School next door, were set up in the 19th Century to give an education to the poor of the parish. Sandhurst Counselling Service was set up by members of this church. And in all kinds of informal ways other members of this church are putting this agenda into practice week by week, whether by acts of kindness or generosity, or by serving others in the community.

Consolation and challenge

This is the context for the blessings and woes which Jesus pronounces in today's Gospel reading. There's something for each of us to take away today.

First of all, the blessings. On Wednesday we looked at this passage in the PCC meeting, and one thing which I noticed was that in Luke's account, Jesus comes down from a mountain, sees all of his followers (not just the 12 apostles), and then speaks directly to them. In Matthew's version of the Beatitudes, Jesus uses the third person, for example: "Blessed are those who mourn, for *they* will be comforted"⁵. But in Luke he says "Blessed are you who weep now, for *you* will laugh".

In the same way, Jesus is speaking to each of us today. Some of us have been going through it, whether as a result of the pandemic, or because of other things happening in our lives. You need a word of consolation or encouragement. Jesus is saying that God is on your side. Trust him. There are happier times ahead.

⁵ Matthew 5:4 NRSV

Jesus addresses those who are poor or hungry, and I'm sure that his main meaning is those who are materially poor or hungry, compared with what he says in Matthew where he refers to the "poor in spirit", and those who "hunger and thirst for righteousness"⁶. There are those who are up against it financially in our community today. Rises in fuel costs and increases in food prices are hitting many people in our country. Jesus is saying that God cares about them, and wants to help them.

He also addresses those who suffer because they are Christians. They face hatred, exclusion and defamation because of their faith. This happens overtly in many countries of the world, and as a church we support the Barnabas Fund, who advocate for Christian minorities and bring them practical help. But it can also happen here. Many Christians in our country find themselves treated with suspicion and even losing their jobs because they don't subscribe to some aspects of the "politically correct" agenda, because it conflicts with their religious convictions.

In Luke's account, Jesus goes on to pronounce a series of "woes", and I suspect that this is the part that we find least comfortable. Most of us here today fall into several of the 4 categories Jesus mentions: those who are rich, those who are full, those who are laughing and those who enjoy favour with others. And just in case you want to say "I'm not rich", think who you are comparing yourself with. Compared with those who are struggling financially in our country, let alone people in the Two-Thirds World, we are rich. I am rich. I am

⁶ Matthew 5:3,6

full, I'm generally pretty happy and I don't often get vilified for my faith. So I fall into all 4 of these categories of people that Jesus is saying "woe" to.

What are we to make of this? Did Jesus hate the rich? That's clearly not the case from what we read in the gospels. In fact, he accepted financial support from a number of wealthy women.⁷

What I think Jesus is warning against is *complacency*. You might not think this is a big sin. I disagree. Complacency leads us to trust in ourselves and our material resources, our financial security, our insurance policies, pensions, burglar alarms and so on. It's an attitude of "I'm all right, Jack"; an attitude of self-centredness, where we make sure *we're* thoroughly provided for first, and then see if we have anything left over to offer to charities or the church.

Jesus is challenging us to see whether we are at all guilty of that attitude. And he's warning that pride goes before a fall. God raises up the humble, but brings down the proud⁸.

As Christians, we are called to seek first God's Kingdom and his righteousness, and then all of our other needs will be provided for⁹. Moreover, Jesus calls us to partner with God in his plan to save the world from the consequences of greed and selfishness, to be praying and working for the transformation of society. If we have money, we could use it to make a difference. If we are happy and feeling secure, we could spend some time listening to those who are unhappy,

⁷ See Luke 8:2-3

⁸ Luke 14:11, 18:14

⁹ Matthew 6:33

showing love and care. If we have a position of respect and influence, we could use it to persuade decision-makers in our company, in our circle of friends, or in the political arena.

Conclusion: consolation or challenge?

Jesus came to announce God's Kingdom, and to call people into it. Much of what happens in our world does not follow the values and principles of God's Kingdom – that's why it's in such a mess. It's time for change, time to turn the world upside down. Or perhaps, to put it back the right way up, as God intended it to be.

In the Beatitudes, Jesus tells us that God is on the side of the poor, the hungry, the sad and those who suffer for the sake of his name. He offers consolation and encouragement to them. And he throws out a challenge and a warning to those who are complacent, and who trust in their own resources.

Which category are you in? If you are in need of consolation today, Jesus says God is on your side. Trust him and he'll get you through. To the rest of us, Jesus is asking, are we on God's side? Are we part of the problem, or part of God's solution? Jesus doesn't want fine words, he wants to see our faith put into practice.

What would that mean for you, and for me, today?