

The theme is: - 'Who's a saint.'

Luke 6:20 to 31 is only a part of Jesus' sermon which extends to the end of chapter 6, and to get a full appreciation of Jesus' sermon I recommend we read to the end of chapter 6, it's not long but it reinforces the answer to today's question of who's a saint. Luke 6:20 to 31 is only a part of Jesus' sermon which extends to the end of chapter 6, and to get a full appreciation of Jesus' sermon we should read to the end of chapter 6 it's not long.

We are told in verse 12, just before our reading, that Jesus went up a mountain to pray, and that he spent the night in prayer to God, and when morning came, he chose 12 apostles from the disciples who were with him and then came down the mountain.

We pick up the story after he came down from the mountain with his twelve apostles, to meet up with a multitude of people from all over Judea, Jerusalem, and the coast of Tyre and Sidon. They had come to be healed of their diseases, and we are told that many were healed. So, too were those with great faith who knew that they only had to touch him, and they would be healed. But in verse 20, the start of our reading, he made it clear that he now wanted to take the opportunity to teach them, so he looked up and said, "Blessed are you who are poor, for yours is the kingdom of God." Jesus often says kingdom of God which he also refers to as the kingdom of heaven, they both mean the same thing.

In Matthew's gospel chapter 5 verse 3 we have, what at first sight looks like the same beatitude, but it isn't. Verse 3 of Matthew's gospel reads, "Blessed are the poor in spirit, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven." Luke's version does not have the word 'Spirit' and that makes a world of difference. Being poor in spirit simply means those who have confidence only in God, those who do not put their trust in earthly things or in themselves but only in God.

Whereas in Luke we have "Blessed are you who are poor." In this instance Jesus could mean many things. It could mean financially hard up, but it is more likely to mean those who are powerless or marginalised like Lazarus who I spoke about last month, somebody who is totally dependent on their neighbours who quite often ignore them, but who was nevertheless totally confident in the love of God, which is why Lazarus went to heaven to be with Abraham. Also, in Luke's gospel Jesus is addressing the people personally, in the first beatitude Jesus said 'yours,' in the second he says, 'You.' Whereas in Matthew he says they and those.

So, the first three beatitudes are, "Blessed are you who are poor, for yours is the kingdom of God." The second one is, "Blessed are you who are hungry now, for you will be filled." And the third is, "Blessed are you who weep now, for you will laugh." When I write this, I have a clear picture of the civilian population of Gaza who are poor, hungry and who weep for their lost children, and who have no affiliation outside their own families but who are suffering beyond belief, which will continue for ages even though there is now a cease fire. And sadly, Jesus said quite clearly that there will always be the poor in the world, and I think Jesus is saying to them, and to us, "Yes, I know your situation but there is nevertheless hope for the future when you put your trust in God who loves you.

And of course, in our reading, Jesus was speaking to all the crowd, to those who were poor and to those who had the resources to make a difference, and they have witnessed his authority first hand, they do not have to have believe through faith, they have seen with their own eyes, whereas we believe through faith.

Here as in last month's sermon on valuing community, the word of Jeremiah comes to mind again when he wrote, "But seek the welfare of the city where I have sent you into exile, and pray to the Lord on its behalf, for in its welfare you will find your welfare." (Jeremiah 29 verse 7) And as Jesus said in verse 27 of our reading, "But I say to you who listen," And to those who had the resources and who were listening they would make the connection, because they would know the writings of Jeremiah and would be reminded that their welfare is linked to the welfare of the poorest among them as was the rich man's.

We now come to the fourth beatitude which reads, “Blessed are you when people hate you, and when they exclude you, revile you, and defame you on the account of the Son of Man.” “Rejoice on that day and leap for joy.” This beatitude promises a reward of happiness and joy to those who endure rejection or persecution because of their faithfulness to Christ. I left this one on its own because it is different to the other three. The first three is Jesus trying to remind them that they are all of one nation and that their faith in God demands that they look after each other particularly the alien, the orphan, the widow, and the poor. Whereas the fourth deals with our relationship with and of our love for God, which non-believers in God cannot stand because it asks them to part with their money and support the alien, the orphan, the widow, and the poor.

We now come to verses 24 and 25 which contains the three woes of the first three beatitudes. Dealing with the first one, “Woe to you who are rich.” This could be the rich man in the story of Lazarus, which we all heard about last month. Had the rich man helped Lazarus, who was lying hungry at his gate and others like him, then when the rich man died instead of going to hades he would have been with Lazarus and Abraham in heaven. So, the woe is not because he was rich but because he ignored the suffering of the people around him who he had the means to help. The same applies to the man who is never hungry and the other who is enjoying his life, because neither of them had any concern for the less well-off who were living around them. The same applies to us, some people may have the resources to help just one other person whereas others may have the resources to help more than one, that’s for each of us to decide, but the decision is an important one.

The fourth woe in verse 26 is of a man, who is everybody’s friend, who on the surface appears to care for everybody, but in reality, he doesn’t care about anyone except himself; I’ve met people like that, they are good at deception and deceitfulness, but nobody can deceive God.

We now come to verses 27 to 28 which reads, “But I say to you that listen. Love your enemies, do good to those who hate you, bless those who curse you, pray for those who abuse you.” And Jesus adds in verse 31 this golden rule, “Do to others as you would have them do to you.” Sadly, it is in our nature to respond like for like, to help those who help us and hurt those who hurt us. So, Jesus’ golden rule is subtly distorted to read, ‘Do unto others as they do unto you’ and has been enshrined in our human nature since the beginning of time. The Old Testament says an eye for an eye and a tooth for a tooth which seems to reinforce that philosophy. But actually, when God introduced an eye for an eye and a tooth for a tooth God was trying to limit the punishment to fit the crime, and to cut out the excesses such as executing a man for stealing a slice of bread. But Jesus says, ‘No,’ even an eye for an eye isn’t good enough, We are to love our enemies, do good to those who hate us, and pray for those who abuse us, an eye for an eye and tooth for a tooth is no longer an acceptable standard of behaviour.

Many years ago, I disliked a man, why I disliked him doesn’t matter, except that it was probably more my fault than his, but he also came to church, and I was always coming into contact with him. Then one day I decided to pray for him, for myself, and for our relationship. Within a fairly brief time I had become to understand him and to like him, and indeed I visited him on several occasions in the old Heatherwood hospital just before he died. For non-Christians to reciprocate is a natural way to order one’s life, but it is not for us who confess to be Christians, we are to love our neighbours. Just as God goes beyond justice to mercy, we are to do the same. It is a hard lesson, one that can go against the grain. But through the grace of God, it is possible to move beyond justice to mercy.

Jesus' message in Luke 6:20-31 turns worldly values upside down, inviting us to embrace humility, compassion, and a heart for justice and mercy. It challenges us to examine our priorities and live in a way that reflects God's love and generosity. While these teachings may seem difficult, they offer a path to true fulfilment and a deeper connection with God and other people. This passage is a call to action, encouraging us to embody the values of God's kingdom in our daily lives, even when it feels challenging and sometimes unnatural. That’s what it is to be a saint!

Revd. John White.