

Luke 6 v17-26 Jeremiah 17 v5-10 Psalm 1
Thinking God's Way - The Beatitudes
written by Sarah Ashton

May our feet walk in your way Lord, may our hands do your work Lord, may our minds think on you Lord, may our hearts be filled with your Love Lord and may my mouth speak your words Lord. Amen

All three of this morning's readings are quite clear in their message. Taking them chronologically, Psalm 1 shows two ways of living: with God and away from sinners will lead to our endeavours prospering; or without God will lead to them perishing. Jeremiah says that the Lord says: 'Blessed is the man who trusts in the Lord, whose confidence is in Him'. This person will flourish like a tree planted by a stream which will survive and bear fruit even in a year of drought, whereas those who trust men rather than God will perish as if they lived in a desert or salt land.

Before I move on to the main text in Luke, which is the Beatitudes, let us just ponder on our own lives for a moment. I'm pleased to see that everyone sitting in church is fully clothed this morning, maybe even wearing an extra layer wondering whether the church will be warm. Many of us have driven here in a car rather than walking. We will have left our own homes, where we probably have a heating system making it comfortable; and don't we know it when that system fails or the power goes off. Some of you will be joining the parish lunch today for a good meal or have other plans for food. All of these point to a form of prosperity. On the outside all is looking good for us. A quick glance at our social media and we will know what exciting things our friends have been up to, places they have visited, events they have attended and friends and family they have caught up with. The gloss on our lives continues. However, underneath things may be very different.

None of us can really sail through life without knowing pain and sorrow, difficult relationships, financial worries or insecurity of some sort. Being a Christian does not exempt us from the trials of life, the ups and downs of being part of a family, the difficulties that need to be faced or difficult decisions made. What we do have as Christians is someone we can turn to and take our worries in large bags and leave them at the foot of the cross. In dying on the cross, Jesus took

our heavy loads from us, as long as we bring them to him in prayer. This does not necessarily solve the problem in itself but verbalising and knowing that you have shared with a higher authority brings some relief and when we are less stressed we can think more clearly and be open to answers.

Just before our reading in the Gospel, Jesus has just spent the night praying to God. He has chosen His twelve apostles and takes them to a large area where many other people are gathered keen to hear Jesus. They don't just want to hear Him but to be touched by Him or to touch Him, perhaps to bring about a cure. As it says in V9, they could feel the power coming from him and healing them. The air is charged and the crowd enthusiastic.

Jesus then begins with great encouragement. He talks about those who are poor, hungry or weeping and says that their needs will be met. Luke emphasises that the temporary duration of hardship now is set against a future fulfilment which allows followers to paradoxically experience joy and happiness in the midst of present difficulties. We are not talking about earthly qualities here though, but spiritual ones. It is not material poverty but spiritual poverty; not a lack of food but a hunger for righteousness. True disciples will not be seeking the instant gratification of this world but must learn what it means to take up their own cross and follow Jesus. In the case of Jesus' twelve disciples this would have meant poverty, hunger (at times), weeping and rejection. In ch 9 He does send His disciples out into the community and tells them to take nothing with them and to only stay where they are welcome. This is "a big ask" for anyone and without God's support would be difficult to sustain.

It does not mean that a Christian today must be poor financially, but it is how a Christian uses their resources that is important. For first century Jews, giving to the poor was a way that a wealthy person believed they might commend themselves to God. The Greek Gentiles who heard Jesus's words would have been shocked. Wealthy Greeks were increasingly focused on their personal fortunes and the few who did share their wealth might endow a library, or a school or cover the cost of a town's feast, not in a philanthropic manner but to boast of their wealth and show it off. "Look what I have and can do!" At the end of last year I visited the cathedral in Seville and whilst it is a truly amazing building, the decoration would be a distraction from worship for me and it was designed to showcase wealth as well as to reflect God's glory, We have to do what we are

doing for the right motive and not for selfish reasons. In Roman society of the time, the poor man who worked for a daily wage was viewed with disgust, not pity or respect. Even those who worked and built up wealth were looked down on by established families. The question is: do we use our resources to further God's Kingdom? If we do, we will be truly happy and blessed. It is made clear that our actions may not make us popular with the secular society but that our reward will come later. To follow Jesus, we must reject the values of human society and follow those laid down by the Messiah. It is possible to obtain the things which the world values by hard work alone, but they are temporal; if we apply the same energy to being utterly loyal to God and true to Christ, we may run into trouble at times and look unhappy by the world's standards, but our future with God is secure and we will have inner peace.

The other side of the coin are the woes. Woe is a word that I often associate with the Old Testament prophets, and with Jeremiah in particular, who spent so much time trying to bring the people back to God's ways. It is a word that warns of God's condemnation if we don't do the right thing. Those who have money and live without sharing with those who are in need have already experienced their comfort. In fact v24 is in the past tense 'you have already received your comfort'. Those who eat well and satisfy their desires without consideration for others will be hungry when the judgement comes for they will be found wanting by God. If you have everything in life but do not come to Christ, once your money is gone or death takes you, you will have nothing, no eternal life with God. Only those who follow God's and Jesus' teachings will know the joy of the kingdom.

The penultimate of the woes is that those who are laughing now will mourn and weep. Weeping and gnashing of teeth is often used to describe judgement and hell. Ps 37 v12 says 'the wicked plot against the righteous and gnash their teeth at them, but the Lord laughs at the wicked for he knows their day is coming'.

The final woe is accepting the praise of people, because that is empty praise. If people approve of all that we do the chances are we are not following in Jesus' footsteps but a more worldly path. Jeremiah 17 v5 says 'Cursed is the one who trusts in man, who depends on flesh for his strength and whose heart turns away from the Lord'. Unlike the man who I referred to at the start who trusts in the Lord and will flourish like a tree beside a stream.

I think it is fair to say that we live in interesting times politically and none of us know what is going to happen on the global stage but we can take great comfort in following God and living his way. Life is not about the gloss of social media and how many 'likes' you get, it is about working to bring God's kingdom to earth, being in communication with God and using the resources we have at our disposal for the benefit of others to the glory of God. The truly 'Blessed' are those who walk humbly with God, not seeking earthly rewards but working towards God's Kingdom and praying that it may be realised here on earth.

Points to think on

Jesus spent the night before this passage praying. Can I spend more time in prayer?

Do I share whatever riches I have in this life willingly with others?

Am I following God's way or paying lip service to it?