

blessings and woes
 a sermon preached on the
sixth sunday after epiphany
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 at
st john's
 ANGLICAN CHURCH CAMBERWELL
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the lections: Jeremiah 17:5-10; Psalm 1; 1 Corinthians 15: 12-20; Luke 6:17-26

On discovering that I would preach to you for the first time on Luke 6:17-26, my response was, appropriately, a mixed awareness of blessing and woe. “The beatitudes”, I thought. “What a wonderful text to preach on. I feel blessed”.

But, a feeling of woe quickly followed because this week's text is not Matthew's eight lovely beatitudes but Luke's four beatitudes and four woes. These are far more difficult to hear, particularly as we sit in this beautiful part of the world with so many current advantages.

Matthew's Jesus delivers the beatitudes on the top of a mountain, alone with his disciples. They are up high, close to God, separated from the world, able to reflect prayerfully on Jesus' words. By contrast, Luke's Jesus comes down from the mountain and preaches about the blessings and woes, to the 12 disciples he has just called, a great crowd of other disciples, and a multitude of people that includes Jews from Judea and Jerusalem, as well as gentiles from Tyre and Sidon.

Matthew and Luke each wants to communicate a different theological message with the setting of this sermon. For Luke, the emphasis is on Jesus as the Saviour of all; Jesus in the midst of everyday, broken, vulnerable human life. We are told that the people are coming to Jesus to be healed, Jews, gentiles, close disciples, crowds of followers; all trying to touch him, for power came out of him. In this context, Jesus speaks to them of blessing and woe; of the establishment of the realm of God in the midst of everyone.

The blessings and woes are statements about God's reversal of the world order. This is a dominant theme in the Gospel of Luke, beginning with the Magnificat, continuing with Jesus' first sermon at Nazareth and seen again here where Jesus tells us that God's priority is for the vulnerable and that in God's realm the power structures the world is used to will be turned upside down.

So, what do the blessings and woes mean?

To be blessed means to be satisfied, unburdened, at peace. In the words of Psalm 1, the blessed are those whose *delight is in the law of the Lord*. This means that blessing is not related to circumstances, which is why it is possible for Jesus to say blessed are the poor, the hungry, the weeping, those who are hated, excluded, reviled and defamed. These circumstances cannot be sugar-coated, no-one wants to be in those kinds of situations, but the promise of the generous love of God is that even if we are in those circumstances, we are blessed.

Jesus tells this mixed bunch of people who have come to him for healing that they are blessed in their vulnerability because God's love and peace are with them no matter what. There is a reminder here for us that God's blessing goes beyond the walls of our church, recognising none of our human distinctions and barriers, seeing only the need for healing.

Jesus' cry of, 'Woe', is a call to repentance; a call to a change of attitude, priority and behaviour. I find an uncomfortable resonance between life in middle-class Australia and those to whom Jesus announces the woes. Be warned, you well regarded, sated, happy, comfortable people! These things you are so pleased with are illusions of happiness, not its true source. The coming of God's realm brings a different way of seeing the world; an unburdened, satisfied peace that relies on God, and to which the comforts of life can easily blind us.

Whereas Matthew's Jesus pronounces blessings on the poor in spirit and those who hunger and thirst for righteousness, Luke's Jesus says that it is the literally poor and hungry who are blessed. It is dependence on God as a result of vulnerability that leads to blessing. It is not impossible for the rich to receive this blessing. Writing in the book of Acts Luke acknowledges the wealthy who support the work of the Apostles, but the physical security and comfort that comes with wealth brings a heightened danger of forgetting that true blessing comes only from a delight in, and dependence on, God.

The New Testament scholar Brendan Byrne says that, 'the poor' is a standard self-description for the faithful in Israel who wait hopefully upon the Lord. It is the realm of God, already here but not yet fully realised, that prioritises the poor and the overlooked, whose only value lies in the sight of God. The challenge for those of us who are in positions of privilege in the current world order, is to give expression to the values and practices of God's realm even as we benefit from the world.

Luke's Gospel demands that priority is given to the poor. As God cares for the vulnerable and persecuted, so must we. The benefits of our lives can be blessings if we direct them to the serving of God's purpose but, if we use them selfishly, we need to hear again Jesus' call of woe, woe, woe.

Taken alongside the readings from Jeremiah 17 and Psalm 1, the picture of blessing and dependence on God is expanded. Both of today's readings from the Hebrew Scriptures use the metaphor of trees in the desert to depict the state of our mortal lives. Heat and drought are coming. Woe to the trees that are growing in the parched places of the wilderness, the lives of those who have turned away from God.

Blessed are the trees whose roots grow into the stream of God's love. They will not fear when the heat comes but will stay green and bear fruit in season. Regardless of what is happening around us in the world, current troubles and troubles to come, as we maintain our trust in God, we stay connected to the ever-flowing blessing of God's love.

Each of these verses of scripture invites us to consider the foundations of our lives. Do we, daily, rely on the love of God or on the current world order? Do we ask God to bless the parts of ourselves that we hate, reject and don't even want to acknowledge or are we content to focus on the parts of ourselves which are well regarded by the world and with which we are pleased?

If we can acknowledge our own places of blessing and woe, could this enable us to see the complicated combination of blessings and woes in those around us, and to extend God's loving-kindness to others because we know the need of it in ourselves?

In each of us there is the potential to connect with blessing or with woe as we choose each day to orient our lives towards or away from God. It is this ongoing choice that ultimately determines whether we experience satisfaction, lightness and peace, or emptiness, burden and lifelessness. God offers blessing to us all, regardless of our circumstances. It is up to us to choose to receive God's gift.

Of course, being blessed doesn't mean that we will never have problems or feel sad, angry and frustrated. Jesus says that on account of him we will be hated, excluded, reviled and defamed. That's a bad day at the office! What it does mean is that, even in the face of the worst that the world can throw at us, we can cling to the knowledge that God blesses and loves us.

Perhaps the ultimate expression of this in Luke's Gospel occurs in the interaction between Jesus and the penitent criminal. As they hang side by side, crucified and dying, the criminal realises his utter helplessness and asks that, when Jesus enters the fullness of God's realm, he will remember him. Jesus tells the criminal that today he will join him in paradise. The blessing of God's love is always available, no matter what. All we must do is see our need and ask for help.

Luke records that Jesus preached his sermon on the level ground to a diverse group of people; a motley crew of Jews and gentiles, all wanting to be healed, all trying to touch him. Jesus unites this disparate group into a community that is blessed by God. In their vulnerability, they come to acknowledge their need to be made whole, and God responds.

This is a powerful image of community. We come together each week with our differing needs and anxieties. We come to God confessing our vulnerability, seeking to touch Jesus because power is coming out from him. We come even though sometimes we struggle to be together. Sometimes we irritate, frustrate and even anger each other. In God's

reversal of the ways of the world, we often find that the people we need the most, are the ones with whom we struggle the most.

Diverse voices permit creativity. They allow us to honour the complexity that exists within each individual heart. They help us to resist being reduced to a monochrome, static point of view, bereft of the capacity to surprise or be surprised.

Blessed are we when we find people who challenge and stretch us and present us with a view of the world that is utterly unlike our own. They may be pointing us to the realm of God.

Amen.