

## Good News and Bad News

The beginning of Matthew, chapter 5, tells us “When Jesus saw the crowds, he went up the mountain; and after he sat down, his disciples came to him. Then he began to speak, and taught them, saying:

“Blessed are the poor in spirit, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven.

“Blessed are those who mourn, for they will be comforted.” (Matthew 5:1-4) And so on.

Those words from the beginning of the Sermon on the Mount are some of the most well-known (and well-loved) verses of the bible. They are poetic, they are profound, they are wise and insightful.

And they’re in Matthew’s gospel. But this year, our lectionary brings us readings from Luke’s gospel, and the gospel reading set for today in our lectionary is the parallel passage to the Sermon on the Mount, from Luke and it starts quite differently.

In the middle of Luke Chapter 6, we heard that [Jesus] went down with them and stood on a level place. A large crowd of his disciples was there and a great number of people from all over Judea, from Jerusalem, and from the coastal region around Tyre and Sidon.

The immediate difference to the Sermon on the Mount is that Luke tells us that Jesus stood on a level place – so it’s not the Sermon on the Mount, it’s the Sermon on the Plain. And on the mountain, he sat down to teach, but here, on the level place, Jesus stands.

And rather than launching straight into the speech, the sermon, Luke tells us that [the people] who had come had come to hear him and to be healed of their diseases. Those troubled by impure spirits were cured, and the people all tried to touch him, because power was coming from him and healing them all.

And so, when Jesus does speak, the crowd are aware of the authority Jesus is speaking with. This man can cure diseases, this man can get rid of the evil spirits that are troubling us: this is a man of power – he must be worth listening to.

Looking at his disciples, he said:

“Blessed are you who are poor, for yours is the kingdom of God.

Blessed are you who hunger now, for you will be satisfied.

Blessed are you who weep now, for you will laugh.

What does it mean to be blessed? Some bible translations translate it as “happy” and it has meanings such as congratulated or fortunate. But how ever we choose to define it, we know that to be blessed is a good thing.

Jesus tells us in this sermon that particular groups are blessed. Blessed are you who are poor, blessed are you who hunger now, blessed are you who weep now. In our experience, those things don’t feel like blessings, do they?

If you think about people who are poor, people who are hungry, people who weep, you’d probably think that they were cursed, rather than blessed.

But the blessings that Jesus talks about, are to come. People aren't blessed because they're hungry, but hungry people are blessed because they will be filled.

And so it is with those who weep – the weeping isn't the blessing, but it's the laughter, the happiness, the joy that is to come that is the blessing.

Jesus goes on to say "Blessed are you when people hate you, when they exclude you and insult you and reject your name as evil, because of the Son of Man." And he spells out when the blessing comes: "Rejoice in that day and leap for joy, because great is your reward in heaven. For that is how their ancestors treated the prophets."

It's not a nice thing to contemplate, but if we are followers of Jesus, then people will exclude us, insult us and reject us. Maybe not all the time, but sometimes. But the time is coming when we will receive our reward: As Peter says in his first letter "By his great mercy he has given us a new birth into a living hope through the resurrection of Jesus Christ from the dead, and into an inheritance that is imperishable, undefiled, and unfading, kept in heaven for you" (1 Peter 1: 3-4) ...nothing can come between us... What God has done for us in the life and death and resurrection of Jesus, cannot be undone.

This is nothing new – Jesus points out that in the days of the prophets people did the same thing. People didn't like the word of God that the prophets brought them, and they took it out on the prophets.

But Jesus tells us that just like the poor will receive the kingdom and the hungry will be filled and those who weep will laugh, and in the same way, the people of God who are persecuted now, will be greatly rewarded.

So it's a lot like the sermon on the mount, isn't it? But as we read on, things change, because in the sermon on the plain, Jesus gives us the other side as well.

"But woe to you who are rich, for you have already received your comfort. (6:24)

So the poor are blessed, but woe to the rich.

Which can be uncomfortable for us. All our circumstances will vary, but generally, we're very well off. Yes, there are some people who are wealthier than us – much wealthier than us. We live in some of the wealthiest suburbs, in one of the wealthiest cities, in one of the wealthiest nations in the world. And we live in the wealthiest time in history, too.

But there is often a wide gap between our needs and our wants, and it fills us with all sorts of frustration, and anxiety. And envy.

Jesus says "But woe to you who are rich, for you have already received your comfort". If all you care about is wealth, that's all you'll get. If you dedicate your life to earning more, and having more, and keeping more... then that's it. As we were reminded a couple of weeks ago in 1 Corinthians 13, all the things of the world will fade away, and all that will remain are faith, hope and love. Or in the expression of the world: You can't take it with you.

So hopefully, even though we may be wealthy, our wealth – or our pursuit of wealth - is not the centre of our lives. We don't want to be like Scrooge McDuck, splashing about in a swimming pool filled with money.

We as the congregation of St Ives Uniting are rich. Thanks to the generosity of those who have come before us, and thanks to the wise and faithful management by our treasurers and our

church councils, the congregation holds a lot of money. But the wealth we have is not to be hoarded, it's to be used – and we are using it (you may have noticed the scaffolding outside!).

Wealth can be either a blessing or a woe. It can bring us joy or it can bring us conflict. It can make us generous, or it can make us misers. But the thing it can't do is bring us everlasting life. And yet so many people in our society seek financial security as if it can really make them secure. And Jesus says it can't, but he can.

And it's the same with the well fed:

Woe to you who are well fed now, for you will go hungry. (6:25a)

So if we're only looking after ourselves now, and not sharing what we have... then when those who are hungry now are fed, we won't be.

And, "Woe to you who laugh now, for you will mourn and weep." (6:25b)

If all we care about is the joys of the world – the pleasures of the flesh, to use the old language – they will fade away, and there will be nothing left and we will mourn and weep.

And finally Jesus says "Woe to you when all speak well of you, for that is what their ancestors did to the false prophets." (26).

Woe to you when all speak well of you.

Doesn't that seem odd here? Isn't it a good thing that people speak well of us? I know I'm always pretty happy when people say nice things about me. And I imagine you quite enjoy compliments too.

But Jesus ties this 'speaking well of you' to what their ancestors did to false prophets, and if we go back to verse 22, "Blessed are you when people hate you, and when they exclude you, revile you, and defame you on account of the Son of Man." We can think of this as the other side to that.

If people are only saying nice things about us because we are telling them what they want to hear, then that is bad.

The false prophets of Jesus' time were popular with the people because they didn't speak the word of God, instead they told people what they wanted to hear.

And it can be the same today. The temptation is always to soften the message of Jesus in some way, to take the edge off scriptures so we present a picture of Jesus who doesn't judge. A picture of Jesus who isn't the only way to God the Father. A picture of Jesus who wants us all to be financially prosperous and so on. A picture of Jesus who doesn't want people to change when they turn to him.

But to change what we say about Jesus in order to make our faith more acceptable to others is fruitless. We may be more popular now, but if we're not sharing the truth of Jesus, then woe to us.

And sometimes the way we seek other people's approval, is to be silent: to not speak of our faith at all. Faith is a private thing, we say. We don't want to kill conversation by talking about religion. But Jesus calls us to share our faith and to tell people the good news. Yes, some

people will reject the good news. They'll reject Jesus. And they'll reject us too (but don't forget that Jesus said, "Blessed are you when people hate you").

But if we don't share the good news... then there are people who will never hear it.

In this passage, the words of Jesus reflect the structure of Psalm 1, our Old Testament reading today. Psalm 1 tells us, "Blessed is the one who does not walk in step with the wicked... whose delight is in the law of the Lord... That person is like a tree planted by streams of water... whatever they do prospers". All good news, right?

But then the next verses of the psalm tells us the bad news, "[the wicked] are like chaff that the wind blows away...the way of the wicked leads to destruction."

So there's bad news as well.

In the beatitudes in the Sermon on the Mount, Jesus tells us only about blessings, but here in the Sermon on the Plain, Jesus tells us about woes as well as blessings.

How do you think the crowd reacted? They all heard the good news, and they all heard the bad news. But how would that have reacted? I imagine the poor were encouraged, but the wealthy felt a bit guilty. The hungry went away hopeful for what was to come, but the well-fed were a bit more nervous than they were before. Those that we feeling pretty smug about themselves were slightly uncertain and so on.

For those people gathered on the plain, was what Jesus said good news or bad news? And for us today, do we take Jesus' words as good news or bad news?

People may not have heard what they wanted to hear, but they would have heard what they needed to hear.

Some were encouraged, some were admonished. Some were given a pat on the back, others were given a warning.

Jesus' sermon on the plain might not be as famous as his Sermon on the Mount, but even today, we need to listen to his words – the blessings and the woes – and see how they speak to us – as individuals and as a church – today. Do they encourage us, or do they admonish us? Are we being told of a blessing to come, or a warning to heed now?

Amen.