

Collect, Readings and Sermon for Sunday 13th February 2022
The Third Sunday before Lent
8 am

Collect

Eternal God,
whose Son went among the crowds
and brought healing with his touch:
help us to show his love,
in your Church as we gather together,
and by our lives as they are transformed
into the image of Christ our Lord.

Amen.

1 Corinthians 15:12-20

Now if Christ is proclaimed as raised from the dead, how can some of you say there is no resurrection of the dead? If there is no resurrection of the dead, then Christ has not been raised; and if Christ has not been raised, then our proclamation has been in vain and your faith has been in vain. We are even found to be misrepresenting God, because we testified of God that he raised Christ—whom he did not raise if it is true that the dead are not raised. For if the dead are not raised, then Christ has not been raised. If Christ has not been raised, your faith is futile and you are still in your sins. Then those also who have died in Christ have perished. If for this life only we have hoped in Christ, we are of all people most to be pitied.

But in fact Christ has been raised from the dead, the first fruits of those who have died.

Luke 6:17-26

[Jesus] came down with them and stood on a level place, with a great crowd of his disciples and a great multitude of people from all Judea, Jerusalem, and the coast of Tyre and Sidon. They had come to hear him and to be healed of their diseases; and those who were troubled with unclean spirits were cured. And all in the crowd were trying to touch him, for power came out from him and healed all of them.

Then he looked up at his disciples and said:

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

‘Blessed are you who are hungry now,
for you will be filled.

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

‘Blessed are you when people hate you, and when they exclude you, revile you, and defame you on account of the Son of Man. Rejoice on that day and leap for joy, for surely your reward is great in heaven; for that is what their ancestors did to the prophets.

‘But woe to you who are rich,
for you have received your consolation.

'Woe to you who are full now,
for you will be hungry.

'Woe to you who are laughing now,
for you will mourn and weep.

'Woe to you when all speak well of you, for that is what their ancestors did to the false prophets.

Sermon by John Richardson

There are many reasons why we might feel that our world has been turned upside down. A change in circumstances, the loss of our job, a bereavement, a sudden illness, a breakdown in relationships. One moment life may be full and exciting and rewarding: the next it may be full of despair and despondency.

Such thoughts came into my mind when I watched this week's Panorama programme, when John Simpson reported on the situation on Afghanistan.

It is hard for us to understand, let alone imagine, the desperate plight of twenty-three million people who face starvation - with no work, no food, no money and no hope. These people's lives have been turned upside down through no fault of their own.

But then I think of those whose lives have been turned upside down for very different reasons. I think of the many thousands of people whose lives have been changed by the Covid pandemic: those who have lost loved ones: those who have suffered and continue to suffer: those whose lives will never be the same again.

And then I think of the millions of people in this country who live in relative poverty - when they have to make a choice between feeding themselves and their families or keeping warm. How many people's lives have been turned upside down through no fault of their own.

If we turn to today's Gospel, we hear Luke's version of the beatitudes. In Matthew's Gospel this episode is known as the Sermon on the Mount: in Luke it is the Sermon on the Plain. Matthew devotes 107 verses to the sermon: Luke only 30.

Matthew presents us with nine blessings: Luke gives us only four. But to those four blessings Luke adds four woes:

- The poor are blessed, but it is woe to the rich.
- The hungry are blessed, but woe to those who are full.
- Those who weep are blessed, but those who laugh will weep and mourn.
- Those who are hated and reviled are blessed, but woe to those who are spoken well of.

God is on the side of the poor, the hungry, the hated.

The way of the world is turned upside down by the way of God.

The arrival of God's Kingdom is the time when God sets an upside down world the right way up.

If we turn to the Old Testament the idea of reversal - of turning things upside down - is the message of the prophets. They proclaimed this message because the people of God had an obligation to care for each other, and especially to care for the poor and needy. This principle is expressed in the idea of the Sabbath Year and Jubilee, which set out the relationship between God and his people and the ways in which the poor and needy should be cared for. All should be treated equally. They proclaimed what was known as the year of the Lord's favour, when the poor would hear good news and the oppressed would be set free. This same idea dominates Luke's Gospel.

A few weeks ago our Gospel was from Luke chapter 4, when Jesus went to the synagogue and read some words from the book of the prophet Isaiah:

"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 of the captives, and recovery of sight to the blind. To let the oppressed go free, to proclaim the year of the Lord's favour."

Jesus applies the words of Isaiah to himself: words which set out clearly how Jesus saw his mission. It was a mission which would proclaim the Jubilee - the year of the Lord's favour - a reversal of the way of the world.

The same theme continues through Luke's Gospel:

- in the Magnificat, Mary speaks of reversal and release - setting an upside down world the right way up.
- Zechariah sings about rescue and salvation and release for the burden of sin.
- Luke's parables speak of a release from bondage to wrongdoing and a reversal of the way of the world.

The events taking place in our world today drive home to us the vast inequalities which exist between those who have and those who have not.

Luke's words may make us feel uncomfortable, because we might be considered to be amongst those who have rather than those who have not. We might feel that we are those who are faced with the woes rather than the blessings. This bias towards the poor and needy which we find in the Gospel is a source of discomfort for those who are relatively well off and well provided for.

The words of Jesus are a reminder to us of the gifts God has given us. Both the blessings and the woes are intended to shape the lives of the disciples -to shape our lives:

- If we consider ourselves to be rich, we have an obligation to care for those who are not.
- If we are well provided for, we have an obligation to help those who are not.
- If we are joyful and content, then we are called to care for those who weep.
- If others speak well of us, then we must do our best to bring relief to those who are hated, excluded and reviled.

Whatever gifts we have received from God are a blessing. They are a means of grace by which we experience God's loving care.

They are a means by which we share that love with others and help to set God's world the right way up.

Amen.