

The Sermon on the Plain

A sermon preached at Lindfield Uniting Church on Sunday 13 February 2022, by David Gill. Readings for the sixth Sunday after the Epiphany of the Lord were Jeremiah 17:5-10, 1 Corinthians 15:12-20 and St Luke 6:17-26

A couple of Sundays ago, the gospel for the day brought us that famous moment, in the synagogue at Nazareth, when Jesus read a passage from the prophet Isaiah.

You remember the words:

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 to 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 not only read those words of messianic hope. He claimed them as his own personal mission statement: this is what God wants of me, this is what my life is for, this is who I am.

And having claimed them, he proceeded to live them. And die for them.

No surprise then that today's gospel, just a couple of chapters later, has him teaching along precisely the same lines. Declaring God's blessing upon the poor, the hungry, those who weep, those who are hated, excluded and insulted. And warning of woe in store for the rich, the satisfied, the happy, those of whom everyone speaks well.

It's Luke's version of the Beatitudes, much shorter than the equivalent in Matthew's gospel. And what Matthew locates as a sermon on a mountain, Luke insists happened on a plain.

But forget the geography. That doesn't matter. The content, however, does. For it takes us to the very heart of what Jesus was on about.

Two things to note before we go any further.

First, remember who Jesus was talking to. Not a pious in-group. Not just his mates. It was a big crowd – yes, the disciples, but Luke goes out of his way to tell us there was “a great multitude of people from all Judea, Jerusalem, and the coast of Tyre and Sidon”. Believers, sceptical non-believers, curious onlookers, potential believers, the lot. The vision of reversal, the promise of blessing, the warning of woe, is for all of them. Not something quarantined for pious Christians.

Second, when he refers to the poor he isn't just talking about money. Poverty, then as now, took many forms. Yes, workers were exploited. Yes, people at the top of the heap used and abused those at the bottom. But, then as now, there was the poverty of broken hearts, crushed dreams and lost hopes.

All this, he tells them, will be caught up and transformed by the purposes of God. But that leads us to the key question. How are we to understand this teaching? What was Jesus driving at? What did he mean, saying those who have drawn the short straw in life are somehow “blessed”?

People who are poor, hungry, grief-stricken, excluded, hated, usually don't appear to be having a particularly wonderful time of it. And, on the other side of the ledger, the rich and privileged generally don't seem to be up to their ears in anguish.

Jesus' promise of blessing and woe, and our experience of life, would appear to be at odds. They don't mesh. So what are we to make of his sermon on the plain?

One interpretation is to "spiritualise" the passage. The poor are blessed because, despite their tough lives, they receive some kind of inner peace and serenity.

Well, yes, sometimes they do. There's more than a little truth in that. Sometimes people do discover true happiness when the false idols of this world – money, status, health etc – fall away.

But be careful. It's too easy to "spiritualise" Jesus' words to the point where poverty – always, of course, the poverty of *others*! – becomes something positive, to be tolerated with an easy conscience. On such a reading, the teaching of Jesus can become a tool for legitimizing poverty, injustice, oppression.

For example, listen to what it would sound like if we were to update what he was saying. It might become something like

- How lucky are you who try to survive on the JobSeeker Allowance of \$310 a week, yours is the kingdom of God!
- How fortunate are you asylum seekers, slowly going mad with your unending imprisonment, you will laugh!
- How blessed are you gay, lesbian and transgender kids being persecuted in a professedly Christian school, great is your reward in heaven!
- How happy are you Jews when your synagogues are defaced and you Muslims when reviled on public transport: it will all be made up to you in spades when you reach paradise!

No, that won't wash. It massively misreads Jesus. He meant what he said. The hungry are blessed because they *will* be filled. The weeping because they *will* laugh. The poor because there is a real chance they *will* cease being poor. The despised and excluded because the prejudices stacked against them now *are* going to change.

Not in some distant utopia. But right here. The kingdom of God, the great reversal, is coming. The world as we know it will be turned upside down.

Even now, you who are suffering are blessed by knowing change is on the way. You are blessed by the signs of God's rule that can already be glimpsed. And that blessing will be magnified when the reversal is complete.

All of which has important implications for us today.

One thing it does *not* imply is that we can sit around, doing nothing, waiting for God to fix things. You know, like those who retreated to mountain tops on 31st December 1999 thinking the world was going to end and all our computer networks were going to crash, when the new millennium arrived at midnight. Today's sermon on the plain is *not* an invitation to laziness or escapism.

It is, rather, a summons to become people of hope. Don't forget what we heard in today's second reading: Paul's powerful reminder of the centrality of Christ's rising. He and all he stood for has conquered. Death and all it stands for has not had the final word.

Last Sunday, over coffee, some of us were talking about Archbishop Desmond Tutu. I remember hearing one of Desmond's addresses, decades ago, at a time when apartheid seemed set in concrete. Typically, he spoke with cheerful enthusiasm about the new South Africa he saw coming. At the time, I could detect no justification for such optimism.

So after the speech I tackled him. Why was he so hopeful, I wanted to know? I expected some shrewd political insights, things known to him as an insider but not to me.

But shrewd political insights was not what I got. What I got was a plain, unvarnished statement of faith.

"Why am I hopeful? Because Christ is risen, man" said Desmond, with an enthusiastic thump that almost dislocated my shoulder. "Christ is risen!"

We are an Easter people. Which means we're called to be a people of defiant hope. A people who know Christ has triumphed. Who will strive to glimpse the hints of God's reign, amid the chaos of the world and the confusion of our own lives.

True, at best they're only partial glimpses. Often ambiguous too. But always they are to be welcomed with gratitude and celebrated with joy.

As an Easter people we will try to live in joyful anticipation of God's reign. So do not be surprised next time church leaders ask us to think about the poor, the forgotten, the detained and imprisoned, the despised and excluded, all those mainstream Australia might prefer to ignore. Do not be shocked, in the run up to the federal election, when church leaders ask us to think before we vote.

And do not be horrified, in just a few minutes, when we're invited to pray "Your kingdom come, your will be done on earth as in heaven". Revolutionary words indeed!

Some may complain about this as the church dabbling in politics. But we know what it really is.

It's the church taking seriously Jesus' sermon on the plain, and love's rising from the grave.

*