

## Blessings and Woes (Luke 6:17-26)

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*10:00am Holy Communion – 16<sup>th</sup> February 2025*

<sup>17</sup> 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. <sup>18</sup> They had come to hear him and to be healed of their diseases; and those who were troubled with unclean spirits were cured. <sup>19</sup> And all in the crowd were trying to touch him, for power came out from him and healed all of them.

<sup>20</sup> Then he looked up at his disciples and said:

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

<sup>21</sup> ‘Blessed are you who are hungry now,  
for you will be filled.

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

<sup>22</sup> ‘Blessed are you when people hate you, and when they exclude you, revile you, and defame you<sup>[a]</sup> on account of the Son of Man. <sup>23</sup> 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.

<sup>24</sup> ‘But woe to you who are rich,  
for you have received your consolation.

<sup>25</sup> ‘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.

<sup>26</sup> ‘Woe to you when all speak well of you, for that is what their ancestors did to the false prophets.

## <prayer>

I was asked recently how you would explain being ‘*blessed*’ to a child, and in this case very little children. Each time St Bart’s school come here to the church, which is normally twice each month, they leave with a blessing which we all share together. It involves a certain amount of jumping up and down and waving arms in the air! It’s a little routine which they can all remember. If you like we could try it today?

**So, I came up with this simple answer: *blessing is like having God’s help*.** Explaining theological ideas to a child is a good way to check your own understanding. But straight away what I said sounds too little, because God’s blessings are so much wider and deeper. I might have said *it’s like having God inside you*, but what would a five-year-old think of that? Or how about: *blessing makes us like God*, in which case when they would go home and when they are asked ‘what did you do today at school dear?’, they could say ‘*I was turned into God!*’

Yet all of these answers are all correct to a degree. As Christians we do change in good ways towards God, holding precious things within us, that are given to us by God, entrusted with something so wonderful. **The blessing of God is a gift we cannot contain.**

Today’s gospel sees Jesus dispensing such blessings, but also some woes too. Here is a familiar scene – a gathering – a crowd. Once Jesus is baptised by John in the Jordan he starts to speak in public, calls a few to follow him (remember those fishermen last week), he heals a few more, and as he does so Jesus begins to build *relationships and reputation* (something you often hear me talking about for our ministry in the parish).

More follow him and so the crowds gather – all of this is intended. But a great question is hanging in the air, and for which Jesus begins to provide answers. **Who is this man?** His family identity is apparent enough – Mary’s son from Nazareth, but his meaning and purpose are not yet clear, and people are starting to realise there is so much more to this fellow. He is blessed by God.

The text immediately before our gospel passage today from Luke 6, has this: ‘**During those days Jesus went out to the mountain to pray; and he spent the night there in prayer. When day came, he called his disciples and chose twelve of them.**’

This sets the scene for a great teaching moment: here is the mountain and here are the twelve. What then unfolds is called the *Sermon on the Plain* or sometimes known as the *Sermon on the Level Place*. Matthew’s gospel has something similar called the *Sermon on the Mount*, which may be more familiar to us.

‘**Jesus came down with them [from the mountain] and stood on a level place. There was a great crowd of his disciples and a great multitude of people from Judea, Jerusalem, and the coast of Tyre and Sidon. They had come to hear him and to be healed of their diseases.**’

**I wonder if you have made a link in your mind to the Old Testament?** It all sounds quite like Moses up the mountain, and all the people – the twelve tribes of Israel – who are down below on the plain below. Moses had ascended the mountain to be addressed by God, and then to take down a vital message to where all the people were. Perhaps it was like a big sermon, setting out all the blessings of the law, reinforcing their relationship with God and each other. The book of Deuteronomy brings this summary:

[Moses said to the people:] See, I am setting before you today a blessing and a curse: the blessing, if you obey the commandments of the Lord your God that I am commanding you today; and the curse, if you do not obey the commandments of the Lord your God, but turn from the way that I am commanding you today, to follow other gods that you have not known. (Dt 11:26-28)

Blessings and curses. That sounds a bit like blessings and woes. **It now seems as if Jesus is sort of synchronising what he is doing now to those ancient times.** At both points God makes a great action amongst people, by the appointment of one who speaks to the masses. In the Old Testament that is Moses, in the New Testament it's Jesus.

When Jesus has his great crowd on the plain, it is greater still. Let's us not miss an important detail in the text: **who were in that crowd?** I don't mean by numbers, but by who gets included. It was: **'a great multitude of people from all Judea, Jerusalem, and the coast of Tyre and Sidon.'** **Both Jews and the Gentiles – it's the beginnings of a gospel to the whole world.**

So, what of *Tyre and Sidon*? Well, these two large towns on the coast, up in Syria to the north of Galilee. They were the gentiles – not God's ancestral people, and Moses was never called to speak to them. In fact, the history of Israel and those towns of Syria is one of broken relationship and division.

Tyre and Sidon were prosperous Phoenician cities, known for their sea trading and skilled craftsmanship. The Jews, residing in the nearby land of Israel, often benefited from their expertise in trade, particularly in the procurement of valuable resources such as cedar wood, which was used in the construction of the First Temple in Jerusalem. However, the relationship was also marked by tension and conflict.

The prophets of Israel often condemned the cities of Tyre and Sidon for their pagan practices and moral corruption, which they feared could influence their own Israelite society. To make matters worse, during times of political upheaval, the Phoenician cities had often sided with Israel's enemies.

**No Jew would have thought of those gentiles as equal for God's blessing.** But here Luke does have Jesus addressing the Gentiles in exactly the same way as God's people. We could make the modern points here about inclusion of others, them and us, peace and reconciliation, and our concerns about those who we think want to be part of us. All this was as politically controversial to the Jews and the gentiles back then, as it is now.

So, what does Jesus say to that crowd? Let's take a look.

You may notice the shape of the pairs, or couplets, set as blessings and woes. The first is quite recognisable to us: 'Blessed are you who are **poor**, for yours is the kingdom of God.' And then to match it: 'But **woe** to you who are **rich**, for you have received your consolation.' Again: 'Blessed are you who are **hungry** now, for you will be filled.', mirrors 'Woe to you who are **full** now, for you will be hungry.'

These could be literal, but surely Jesus is not trying to set himself up as a policy maker for economics and food supply. Jesus is a preacher, not a lecturer. **These couplets, these stanzas, are synonyms for the soul**, what in modern parlance we call wellbeing and wholeness. But neither is Jesus wanting to be merely your life coach, ready with sage advice when you want it.

Jesus goes deeper in what he says. Consider: 'Blessed are you who weep now, for you will laugh.', with: 'Woe to you who are laughing

now, for you will mourn and weep.’ These go much further than the daily need of sustenance. Even more so: ‘Blessed are you when people hate you, and when they exclude you, revile you, and defame you.’ Is it a blessed thing to be hated? Here Jesus reminds the crowd of how the lone prophetic voice may be nearest to God yet rejected by the crowd. As it was with all the prophets God sent, and it would be with Christ himself too. ‘But Woe to you when all speak well of you.’ How often do we find error in the loudest voices we hear? **It is better to be with one in truth than with the crowd of errors.**

I’d like to finish by making a somewhat technical point on the text.

That word **Woe** – Greek: *OUI* In Old English: *Wa!* It’s an exclamation and an **adjective** to describe me – Woe is me! This is how I am or that is how you are, at the level of situations or current troubles. That woe can be changed, can be removed, to better things.

The word **Blessed** - Greek: *MAK-AR-IOI* is a noun, so it’s a thing we totally are in the very deepest definition of us, at the level of birth and life. You have become this thing, you are now this person – blessed.

I think the gospel text bring it over well: *Woe to you, but blessed you are.* The old has gone, the new has come. Be renewed and transformed by the renewing of your mind. Be born again.

**(John 5:24)** “Very truly, I tell you, anyone who hears my word and believes him who sent me has eternal life, and does not come under judgment, but has passed from death to life.”

**(2Corinthians 5:17)** “So if anyone is in Christ, they are a new creation: everything old has passed away; see, everything has become new!”

**(Colossians 1:13)** “God has rescued us from the power of darkness and transferred us into the kingdom of his beloved Son, in whom we have redemption and the forgiveness of sins.

**So, what does it mean to be blessed?** It means a great deal indeed. It is the chance of total inclusion, total acceptance and total transformation, for life. It’s like God’s help beyond any other. We are so much more than ourselves, we are blessed by God.

Amen