

## Ordinary VI 17th February 2019 ChCh-St. Luke's

**Readings: Jer.17:5-10; Ps 1; 1 Cor.15:12-20; Luke 6:17-26**

### Reflection:

I wonder how I would have reacted if I'd been a new disciple – a follower of Jesus – that day? I imagine myself standing with the great crowd of disciples (and twelve apostles), as together, we watched Jesus teaching and responding to the needs and requests of the 'great multitude from all Judea, Jerusalem and the coast of Tyre and Sidon' (in other words, a mass of both Jews and Gentiles – religious and irreligious - the devout, the curious, educated and uneducated, the suffering and the hungry, the hopeful and the despairing). What would I have thought as this prophet-healer-carpenter from small-town Nazareth responded with compassion and healing power to *all* those who sought to touch him?

I can imagine the voices of those around me and the voices inside my own head....

'Look at those Gentiles – what gall, approaching him with such boldness!' 'How dare those untouchables compromise his purity!' 'Are they really from Tyre...and Sidon?' (prosperous Roman port cities). 'Surely *those* Judeans don't have ears to hear his words?'

Isn't it human nature to build walls, create insiders and outsiders, rules of belonging and penalties for stepping out of line?

Luke, in previous chapters, has introduced us to the uncomfortable, upside-down kingdom of God – Jesus – rejected as prophet in his hometown; Jesus - healing on the Sabbath, touching the unclean, forgiving sins, banqueting with tax-collectors, not requiring his disciples to follow religious laws..... – criticized, rejected, scorned

Then he looked up at his *disciples* (not the gathered multitude) and said: Blessed are you who are poor.....hungry now, weeping now, hated, excluded, reviled ....and woe to you who are full, laughing, spoken well of.....

Where and who am I, in this great crowd of disciples? Torn between the comforts of western world affluence and the longing to follow Jesus, knowing only too well, how easy it is to build

walls of distrust and to criticize those who are different; experiencing that distrust and criticism from others (as an aside, meeting with members of the Tikanga Pakeha Ecumenical Group last week was a reminder, both of the compromised history of Christ's body the Church and of the encouraging, if slow, progress of seeking and celebrating unity in diversity in the Church).

Yet, Jesus, servant leader, lover of all peoples, looks deeply and lovingly at us as he did those gathered disciples, and speaks these words.....'blessed are you....woe to you....'

....words described by William Barclay as a series of bombshells, for each one *is* a challenge - countercultural – taking accepted standards and turning them upside down.

One commentator notes that it begins with Jesus coming *down* (the mountain) and standing *with* them on a level place – they meet on a level playing ground – so to speak. No hierarchical dominance here – the servant leader meets *all* – just where and as they are....

But it *begins* well before this:

In a small village in the hill country of Judea, young, pregnant Mary enters the home of her elderly relative Elizabeth, and bursts forth with a song of praise to God, exclaiming with joy that God has come to the help of his servant Israel, that “he has shown strength with his arm” by “scatter(ing) the proud in the thoughts of their hearts,” by “bringing down the powerful from their thrones and lift(ing) up the lowly,” by “fill(ing) the hungry with good things and send(ing) the rich away empty.” God is breaking into the world, Mary declares, with the intention of turning the world upside-down.

Some thirty years later, a man enters the synagogue in Nazareth. He is handed the scroll of the book of the prophet Isaiah. He opens it and reads:

*“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 favor.”*

He looks into the expectant eyes of the congregation and declares, “*Today this scripture has been fulfilled in your hearing.*” God is breaking into the world, he is saying, with the intention of turning the world upside-down.

And Jesus, standing on a level place in Galilee, declares that this upside-down kingdom has now arrived, and the prophecy of Isaiah concerning the poor, the imprisoned, the diseased and the oppressed is no longer a hope but is “an agenda for the *followers* of Jesus.”

We, who enjoy a privileged status in the world by reason of our birth, who have used more than our share of the resources of the world to provide ourselves with a most comfortable living, what shall we make of these words of Jesus? As Jane Addams, (19th century) wrote:

*"The good we secure for ourselves is precarious and uncertain until it is secured for all of us and incorporated into our common life."*

Jesus – fixing his eyes on those first disciples – identified them as blessed. Blessed because they were financially poor, physically hungry?? No. Blessed, because they had responded to His call on their life. Blessed, because they were committing to Kingdom living. Blessed, because – at some level -they recognized their spiritual poverty and their hunger and thirst for justice. Jesus warns his disciples that in this age God's servant community faces marginalization. Yet in a sense, marginalization is a privilege – a ‘beatitude condition’ - for it heralds the non-worldly, everlasting attention and love, which is God.

Perhaps you can recall special ‘beatitude’ moments when the attitude of your heart has brought comfort, hope and strength in a time of suffering? Moments when you have dug deep into the soil of God’s grace. For me, there have been many simple beatitude experiences:– poverty..... of Spirit, or finances that brought a deeper reliance on God; hunger for justice that challenged me to take a stand or journey with the disempowered (whatever the personal cost); grief, that sent me straight to the arms of a compassionate and loving God, experienced too, in the warmth of family and friends; the call to Holy Orders, challenging me to a deeper trust and reliance on God.

The ordination service in our New Zealand Prayer Book includes the following challenge:

*“You are marked as a person who proclaims that among the truly blessed are the poor, the troubled, the powerless, the persecuted. You must be prepared to be what you proclaim.”*

Each bomb-shell experience strengthens me and my relationship with God, just as it did the early Christians – Jew and Gentile - who heard Luke’s gospel message. Each bombshell experience invites us deeper into the mystery and refreshment of God.

Today’s psalmist and the prophet Jeremiah eloquently describe well-watered trees, as images of our lives when we trust in God and follow God’s way with all our heart, and all our mind, and all our strength:

*‘Happy are those whose delight is in the law of God,  
and on God's law they meditate day and night.*

*They are like trees planted by streams of water...’ Ps.1*

*‘Blessed are those whose trust is the LORD.*

*They shall be like a tree planted by water,  
sending out its roots by the stream.*

*It shall not fear when heat comes, and its leaves shall stay green;  
in the year of drought it is not anxious,  
and it does not cease to bear fruit.’ Jer.17*

The Christ-focused stance of our heart will never exclude us from pain and suffering, but it will ensure that we live and move and have our being in kingdom hope. As Barclay stated: Jesus had no doubt which way in the end brought happiness. F.R. Maltby said, “Jesus promised his disciples three things – that they would be completely fearless, absurdly happy and in constant trouble.” I wonder how close we are to living that extraordinary kingdom way, as the people of God in this place? Completely fearless, absurdly happy...in constant trouble?? What might that look like?

Let us pray:

*Creator God, You call us to put down our roots,  
deep into the soil of your righteousness,  
tapping into the streams of your mercy and love.*

*Nourish us, refresh us, that we may grow and bear kingdom fruit.*

*God of bombshells, tear apart our prejudice*

*shatter our complacency; expose our vulnerability -  
that we may be who you call us to be:  
uncomfortably and passionately yours, Amen.*