

Sermon: Are we really blessed when we are poor and in mourning?

Reading: Matthew 5:1-12

Introduction

When were the times in your life when you felt blessed?
Was it when you got your first promotion?
Was it when you heard your boyfriend or girlfriend say, 'I love you?'
It may have been when the midwife said, 'It's a boy' or 'It's a girl?'
Was it when you got the all clear from the hospital specialist? or
When you woke up this morning and praised the Lord for a new day?

I doubt if you felt blessed when.....

You were poorest

Mocked or bullied

Bereaved - The pain of loss can be disabling, whether it is health, wealth or relationship so why does Jesus call those who are poor, mourn blessed?

Context:

Jesus has laid down the hammer and chisel on the carpenters bench and locked up the shop. He sets off to the Jordan where He is to be baptised by John. The next time we see Jesus carrying timber is when He picked up His cross on the way to Golgotha in 3 years time. Jesus baptism marked the change of life direction, as it does for each of us when we are baptised. 'No longer our own but Yours,' we say annually at our Covenant Service which reminds us of our baptismal or confirmation promises. Jesus no longer working in the family business shaving wood, but embarks now on His Fathers business saving souls.

What an amazing scene His baptism must have been! We are told the Holy Spirit is seen descending upon Jesus in the form of a dove; the heavens are opened and the thunderous voice of the Father is heard affirming Jesus as His Son with these words,

"This is my beloved Son, in whom I am well pleased' (**Matt 3:17**).

As some of us will recognise from our own Christian walk, we can feel so blessed with a wonderful experience of God one minute and the next we find ourselves in the wilderness! This is what happened to Jesus, as the Holy Spirit led Him into the valley of shadows. Jesus shows us how we are to conduct ourselves in these troublesome and testing times, as they help shape and prepare us for the next stage of our Christian journey. Unfortunately so many fall in this valley, lose heart and give up, failing the time of testing. In these times of testing, we must hold tightly to the promises of God and not remain there, but keep walking through. If you are feeling like you are in an arid, dry and barren wilderness at the moment, facing demons by night and fears by day, remember, 'The Lord is my Shepherd', I shall not fear, even though I walk through the valley of shadow of death, (**Ps 23**).

Jesus was tested in the wilderness for 40 days, night and day. He journeyed through the valley of shadows, facing all of the trials and temptations we would ever face in life. No human could possibly survive the full extent of the trials Jesus experienced, going so long without food and water is impossible for man, but not for the incarnate One. The bodily, physical punishments, the enduring spiritual torments and feelings of isolation and loss must have been overwhelming, and yet Jesus conquered, 'Greater is He who is in us than he who is in the world' (**1 John 4:4**). If Jesus had fallen into temptation and sin at this point the whole mission would have failed right there and then, humanity would have been

lost in these first 40 days of testing and we would still be living under the devils curse for all eternity.

Jesus first sermon

After Jesus wilderness experiences we would assume ministry would be a walk in the park for Him, after all, He went through severe hunger and thirst and even confronting Satan, however this was not the case. His battles and struggles have only just started. Jesus returned to His home town and enters the synagogue as was His custom for worship. He is given the opportunity to read the lesson for the day and speak on the passage. The tone in the synagogue begins with praise from the congregation, but as Jesus speaks the mood changes and the congregation become furious (**Luke 4:28**). To help us understand more fully the teachings of the Beatitudes, we need to consider first the passage Jesus reads from in the synagogue, this helps us to unlock the context of His mission priority and teaching primarily. This is what He read.....

“The Spirit of the Lord is on me,
because he has anointed me
to preach good news to the poor.
He sent me to proclaim freedom for the prisoners
and recovery of sight for the blind,
to release the oppressed,
to proclaim the year of the Lord’s favour”
(Luke 4:18-19).

Sadly the congregation were so angry with what Jesus said of this passage, they dragged Him from the synagogue, taking Him up to the hill top on which the town was built in order to throw Him off (**Luke 4:29**). Jesus was violently rejected by His own towns people. Luke records Jesus simply passed through this angry mob to continue with the Fathers work. Jesus now heads up to Capernaum which was the home of Peter, Andrew, James and John the sons of Zebedee. It was also the home of Matthew the tax collector who later also became a follower of Jesus.

Jesus Mission Begins

Jesus didn't preach a message of God's unconditional love for everyone, nor did He reassure everyone that God loved them just as they are! What He did preach is clear in Matthew's gospel,

“from that time on Jesus began to preach,
“Repent for the kingdom of heaven has come near”
(Matthew 4:17)

Jesus reputation and ministry is growing large as He is becoming well known throughout the region for His miraculous powers of healing and His gift of teaching and preaching. Crowds are following Him from far and wide, desperate to hear His teachings of the Kingdom of God. In our reading today, Matthew records Jesus saw huge crowds following Him and went up the mountain side and sat down, and began teaching His disciples. Jesus summarises the characteristics of the kingdom of heaven with 9 Beatitudes or 9 blessings which are revolutionary and turn the ways of the world upside down, but we must understand them correctly or we will remain confused by them.

How best to understand the Beatitudes?

Remember earlier what Jesus read in the synagogue? It was taken from the book (scroll) of Isaiah. Jesus tells them this writing from the prophet Isaiah is fulfilled today in your hearing today, because I have come.....

Preaching good news to the poor.
Proclaiming freedom for the prisoners
Recovery of sight for the blind,
Release the oppressed,
Proclaim the year of the Lord's favour

Its important to highlight two important points here. Firstly Jesus is preaching good news to the poor. He is preaching something so amazing, it will revolutionise the world, release captives and recovery of sight to the blind. Jesus is not advocating mass release of those serving time in prisons, nor is Jesus speaking of a cure for blindness (although Jesus brought about their physical healing). Jesus is speaking of those who are trapped in spiritual darkness, locked in prisons of shame and bound by chains of guilt and sin.

Those who are bound by the shackles caused by sin in their lives. Those unable to break free form their chains are

Living half lives

Carrying chains of such weight it's tiring, crushing and disabling
Trapped without a way out.

Living under a life sentence of guilt and sorrow.

Hearts weighed down with despair
Filled with Sadness,
Regret and
Depression

These are the prisons Jesus is speaking of and the spiritual darkness which binds people keeping those who are trapped in a guilt and shame, living an existence without hope. Those who have reached the limit of themselves and are despondent, those who are discouraged thinking, 'Is this really all there is in life?' The good news Jesus brings is freedom from the shackles that bind and imprison a release for the captive as they receive sight to see a way out of their guilt and sin. Wesley's hymn says it so well, 'My chains fell off, my heart was free, I rose went forth and followed Thee'.

Blessed are the poor.

When Jesus referred to the poor as blessed, He is speaking primarily of the poor in spirit, not economically or materially poor (**Matt 5:3**). Those who are poor in spirit are those who are burdened by such a weight of their own sin, they feel utterly helpless in their conviction and have an acute sense of their own worthlessness before Almighty God. Jesus tells those who recognise this state within themselves saying, they are blessed. Why is this? Because the kingdom of heaven is opened up to them. (**Matt 5:3**). For those who feel trapped by the bars of hell, and know within themselves they are truly lost even though they may have gained so much materially they know there is still something missing. Jesus proclaims a message of hope and salvation, Jesus assures them of a great and wondrous rescue which will come through Him alone. For He is bread for the hungry and drink for the thirsty (**John 6:35**).

This poverty of spirit we read throughout Scripture captures kings, prophets and fisherman alike, no one is exempt from this emptiness. King David knew of it (**Psalms 51**). Isaiah experienced it when he found himself standing before Almighty God and cried out, "Woe is me for I am a sinner, for I am a man of unclean lips and live long a sinful people" (**Isa 6:5**). Peter the fisherman, also knew this weight of soul burden, saying to Jesus, "Depart from me Lord for I am a sinner" (**Luke 5:8**).

The world mocks this language and the church struggles to preach today, embarrassed by it, preferring to speak a more positive, uplifting message of unconditional love, avoiding the challenge of confronting sin and calling for repentance. If we are to bring about transformation with our message of good news for the poor, we need to remember we are not life coaches preaching an uplifting, motivating pep talk, but preaching the Great Physician and Healers true message, its Jesus message to the poor and it should be ours also - for this is where hope lies. We are not speaking primarily to the material poor which becomes a gospel of prosperity. Jesus was referring to those who recognise they are impoverished in spirit and only the Saviours blood can cleanse and rescue them. What a blessing it must be to hear, 'Yours is the kingdom of heaven'. The hymn writer John Newton, writer of the wonderful hymn Amazing Grace sums up this spiritual poverty so well

"Amazing Grace how sweet the sound
that saved a wretch like me
Once I was lost but now I'm found
blind but now I see"

Twas Grace that taught my hart to fear and twas grace that will lead me home - God's grace alone. This is the recovery of sight Jesus is speaking of. Those who can honestly look upon their own lives and their heart and admit their blindness and lostness with Godly sorrow, as the words of Newton, wretchedness! For the kingdom of God belongs to them, Jesus said, "I have not come to call the righteous, but sinners to repentance" (**Luke 5:32**).

What is Godly sorrow

God intends we feel the full weight of sorrows for sin so that we enjoy the full expression of joy in salvation. When we have been forgiven much we love much, (**Luke 7:47**). The implication here, there must be sorrow over sin in order for there to be true repentance! God wants us to see that living in a fallen world produces sorrow for everyone. He also wants us to see that sorrow is not in line with His purpose, since it only produces death. This is made explicitly clear in Paul's letter to the Corinthians, he writes,

'Godly sorrow brings repentance that leads to **salvation and leaves no regret**,
but worldly sorrow leads to death"
(**2 Cor 7:10**).

Now that is Good News indeed!

'Has not my hand made all things, and so they came into being declares the Lord, "These are the ones I look on with favour, those who are humble and contrite in spirit, and tremble at my word" (**Isaiah 66:2**).

Summary

The point of the beatitudes is not pie in the sky when I die nor is it a placebo to comfort the materially poor and impoverished in their daily grind in life. The beatitudes are indeed Good News for those who recognise their true condition before a holy and righteous God. When we discover God we discover the grace of God and His love for us. This message is a great message of hope in which we are given the opportunity to become God's children and therefore saints in this world. To end with another hymn, "What a friend we have in Jesus, all our sins and griefs to bear, what a privilege to carry, everything to God in prayer. O what peace we often forfeit, O what needless pain we bear. All because we do not carry everything to the Lord in prayer.

Remember we are called to be saints and when in the valley God is our Good Shepherd, and we are never lonely for what a friend we have in Jesus our great Saviour, priest, brother, King and friend. **Amen**