

Sermon for Sunday 13th February 2022 (Septuagesima) 'What does Jesus mean by asking us to level up?' from Fr. Mike.

- Jeremiah 17.5-10; Psalm 1; 1 Corinthians 15.12-20; **Luke 6.17-26**

Luke describes Jesus standing on **'the plain'** (or 'a level place'). Matthew sets a similar sermon on a mount to emphasise that Jesus received those teachings from God. The geographical setting has a different function this morning in the Gospel of Luke. Some prophets use the word 'level' that provides the background for its use in Luke-Acts (*pedinos* in the Septuagint, the Greek translation of the Torah, Prophets, and Writings). The word 'level' often refers to places of corpses, disgrace, idolatry, suffering, misery, hunger, annihilation, and mourning (see Jeremiah 9:22; 14:18; 30:4; Daniel 3:1; Joel 1:10, 20; 2: 22; 3:19; Habakkuk 3:17; Zechariah 12:11).

Luke portrays Jesus as the final prophet who announces new priorities - the partial manifestation of the Realm of God in the present and points to its completion at the apocalypse. While the early church expected that final coming to take place fairly soon, Luke manages that expectation and prepares the community for a delay.

Not unlike our present challenge during pandemic, Jesus' followers are to live in the present on the basis of the values and practices of the ideal Realm. The Lukan Jesus spells out representative qualities of living as witnesses of the Realm of God in the midst of the now-outdated-age, made superfluous by the arrival of Jesus. However, people do not automatically live in the Realm on the strength of their own will. God empowers the community with the Holy Spirit.

Jesus teaches the way of the Realm in the midst of the world as such a level place. He recognises that the only reason the world is not ideal, not following the way of the Realm, is

that we refuse to make it so. We have got our priorities wrong, and need to reset them before it is too late. He shows us what is required (**'blessed are...'**) and what behaviours will be cursed (**'Woe unto you...'**). Today we are bluntly reminded of that which is acceptable, and that which is not, so that we are fully aware of whereabouts we truly stand. He 'levels' with us. So, there is a clear choice being presented – to acknowledge our current position, and thereafter to do something about it if we find ourselves on the wrong aspect of 'the plain.' We are given fair warning.

Jeremiah also sets the scene by reminding us that divine judgement awaits those who do not heed the messages from our God, who is all too aware of our capacity to take the easy route or even to lapse into rebellion - **'I the Lord search the heart, I try the reins, even to give every man according to his ways, and according to the fruit of his doings'** (v.10).

Again, the Psalmist offers clear reassurance by declaring in the very first line of the first Psalm, **'Blessed is the man that walketh not in the counsel of the ungodly, nor standeth in the way of sinners, nor sitteth in the seat of the scornful.'**

To be **"blessed"** then for Luke does not mean an absence of struggle. Indeed (as 6:22-23 indicates) to be in the community moving towards the Realm can invite hatred, exclusion, being reviled, and being defamed as others reject the Realm and its witnesses. To be blessed is **to live through such opposition** aware that the struggle is **temporary** and that **'your reward is great in heaven,'** that is, that God will gather the faithful into the Realm.

To live under the verdict of **'woe'** means condemnation — suffering under curse in the present and receiving final consignment to eternal punishment after the apocalypse.

The woeful *may not* experience apparent discomfort during this life. However, they mistake the wealth, overflowing tables, good times, and clubby relationships for God's highest purposes. Like the rich person of Luke 16:19-31, they will awake to a fiery existence!

Although the Lukan Jesus does not directly urge listeners to make a choice between the ways of blessing and woe, the fact of these two possibilities being clearly present in the text seems to *imply* such a choice. **Luke wants listeners to *choose* the way of blessing.**

To be sure, condemnation awaits those who do not repent. Although a longer view of Luke's attitude towards persons with wealth and high social standing reveals a pastoral concern: Luke wants such folk to avoid condemnation by repenting and joining the movement towards the Realm, which effectively means putting their material resources at the service of the community. Luke intends to shock persons with wealth into repentance and sharing their money and goods.

What does all this mean for us?

In terms of wealth, we are apparently in the top six nations of the world. Many of us are aware that today's world is a fractured 'level place' in the Lucan sense described above. But few congregations are deeply hungry for (much less weeping for) the level of social transformation implied in the Realm. Only a few contemporary Christians and congregations are hated, excluded, reviled, and defamed because of their witness. Indeed, my impression is that most congregations today in the long-standing denominations are in situations more like that of those of Luke's world who had wealth, were full, and laughing, and were in good social standing according to the standards of the old age.

What then might be our calling as a community of faith?

In such a context, we may be able to recognise our actual point of identification with the text (with those of means, etc.), to realise the consequences of continuing that identification (namely punishment) and to think afresh about how we might begin to move more towards witnessing to the Realm. To do so is to experience the blessing referred to by Luke.

A practical example of contributing to the Realm?

People are literally hungry in our city, yet there is perfectly edible food being wasted. This is a national disgrace. The City Centre Chaplaincy has recently developed a partnership with local supermarkets to intercept this unnecessary waste and make it available to those who need it most yet cannot afford to buy it. The food is to be stored in a 'Community Fridge' based in our church porch, and those who are in need will be invited to simply collect all we can provide. This redirection of quality food is good stewardship, compassionate, and non-judgemental witness. If you feel able to support by occasionally sacrificing your time to collect items for our fridge, please make yourself known to either myself, Michelle (church office) or to our churchwardens, because your help would be a valuable mission contribution. As we begin our three-week journey through the 'Gessimas' towards the season of Lent (focussing broadly upon Prayer, Fasting and Giving) the last word should go to the appointed Psalmist, who pulls all the themes for today together for us as follows:

'For the Lord knoweth the way of the righteous: but the way of the ungodly shall perish.'(v.6)

Fr. Mike, Septuagesima 2022.