

Sermon 20 March 2022

The beatitudes contained in this passage closely correspond with the beatitudes in the better-known passage in Matthew 5:1-11, otherwise known as the Sermon on the Mount. This passage is referred to as the Sermon on the Plain. There are differences but one thing that is undoubtedly true for both is that they are quite revolutionary. I mean, who would be expected to be blessed when they are poor, hungry, sad or excluded? So what does all this mean?

I want to make the point that, by and large, the blessings Jesus is talking about are predicated on the belief in a life beyond our life here on earth. I refer to verse 23: *'When that happens, rejoice! Yes, leap for joy! For a great reward awaits you in heaven.'* As Christians we believe that what we do with our lives here on earth determines the quality of our spiritual life when we move on. I quote from 2 Corinthians 5:10. *'For we must all stand before Christ to be judged. We will each receive whatever we deserve for the good or evil we have done in our bodies.'*

I also believe there are many blessings to be received here on earth in terms of reward and fulfilment, not to mention the well-known adage, *'the more you give, the more you receive.'*

On that note, I would like to focus for a moment on the first beatitude Luke mentions: *'Blessed are you who are poor, for yours is the kingdom of God.'* He follows this up a few verses later: *'Bout woe to you who are rich, for you have received your consolation. Woe to you who are full, for you will be hungry.'* Now this sounds a bit harsh and at face value Jesus appears to be damning anyone who might be wealthy. But I don't think for one moment that is his intention. I say that for two reasons.

Firstly, it is not a matter of how much wealth we may or may not have, but rather it is what we do with that wealth that matters. We actually need people to create wealth in order that the needy can be provided for, and it is in providing for the needy that we find our reward and fulfilment. We actually need the creation of wealth in order that God's work can be carried out. The building of our new church and community centre is a very good example.

The story is told of a Franciscan monk in Australia assigned to be the guide and gofer to Mother Teresa when she visited New South Wales. Thrilled and excited at the prospect of being so close to this great woman, he dreamed of how much he would learn from her and what they could talk about. But during her visit, he became frustrated. Although he was constantly near her, he never had the opportunity to have a meaningful conversation with her. There were always others demanding her attention.

Finally, Mother Teresa's tour was over, and she was due to fly to New Guinea. In desperation, the monk spoke to her, *'If I pay my own airfare to New Guinea, can I sit next to*

you on the plane so I can talk to you and learn from you?' Mother Teresa looked at him. 'You have enough money to pay your fare to New Guinea?' she asked. 'Yes,' he replied eagerly. 'Then give your money to the poor,' she said. 'You'll learn more from that than anything I can tell you.'

The second point I want to make, though it is rather a couple of points wrapped into one, is that Jesus alludes here to our happiness lying in wait for us in the next life but elsewhere in Luke's Gospel, he makes the point very clearly. '*Sell what you have and give to those in need. This will store up treasure for you in heaven.*' Luke 12:33. He then reiterates this with virtually the same words in Luke 18:22. Our relationship with God and what happens to us when we come face to face with him in the next life depends very much on the sort of people we are, not necessarily on what we have.

It's really a matter of values, and all too often the values of this world are different from God's. We value gold, God values righteousness. We value wealth, God values giving. We value status, God values humility.

Speaking of values, I am reminded of the story of J Paul Getty, who was an oil baron, at one time the richest man in America. He was so obsessed with money that he installed a payphone in his London mansion so that guests could pay for their phone calls. He was married five times, each marriage ending in divorce. He had five sons and his relationship with all of them was difficult, to say the least.

When his twelve year old son, Timothy, died of cancer, Getty was on a business trip in Europe. He decided not to go back to the States to be with his wife and family. He did record the boy's death in his diary: 'Funeral. Sad day. Shell oil up 3 cents, Exxon down 1 cent.' Quite clear where his priorities, his values lay.

However, he is reputed to have said later in life, '*I hate to be a failure. I hate and regret the failure of my marriages. I would gladly give all my millions for just one lasting marital success.*' I think that says it all. Our happiness lies not with what we have but in our relationships, whether that is with those close to us, with our fellow human beings whoever they might be, and of course, with God.