

The Sermon: Blessings and Woes

Pause for a moment and try to imagine you are amongst the crowd gathered around Jesus that day. You've been drawn to hear what he has to say and are hoping to find peace and healing from physical, mental or spiritual anguish. Each one of you is intent on touching Jesus, so you push and jostle those around you, pressing forward without regard for anyone else. You are looking for a personal connection, a positive experience, something that will transform your life.

We're told that and "those who were troubled with unclean spirits were cured" and Jesus healed all who touched him.

But this is not enough for Jesus, his ministry did not end with healing but continued with teaching which is directed towards his newly chosen disciples. It would be easy to imagine that at that moment he would capitalise on the positive atmosphere, and indeed, that is how his message begins.

Blessed are you: who are poor, who are hungry, who weep, who are hated.

God's blessing is for the poor, the hungry and the sad in the ordinary senses of the words and Jesus has demonstrated this in healing those who came to him sick. Through Jesus healing power, these people would encounter more blessings than either they or we can initially imagine. Healing would not only be about the underlying illness or situation being rectified but also about how their lives could be transformed in so many other ways in the future. Freed from constraints that would have prevented them from working, enabled to engage with the communities in which they had previously been outcasts, empowered to put food on the table for themselves and their families and inspired to joyfully live life to their full potential being just a few I can initially think about. This potential is also reflected in the reading in Jeremiah, in which those who place their trust and faith in God, not only discover and experience the ordinary things that occur as a result of that relationship, but also to discover something beyond the ordinary, who see God's "otherness" and the ways God connects with us to help us grow and be fruitful.

Blessed are those who trust in the Lord, 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. Jesus chooses to do something that is closer to people's experiences in daily life, something more down to earth, he speaks of the four beatitudes and four woes. Each beatitude is balanced with a warning: "Blessed are you who weep now, for you will laugh." "Woe to you who are laughing now, for you will mourn and weep."

Just as the prophet Jeremiah warned how those who put their trust in their own abilities or in the trust of other mortals and turn away from God, would be isolated and parched, so Jesus warns that woe will befall those Who are rich, Who are full, Who laugh, Who are honoured.

I don't believe that Jesus is saying that poverty, weeping, hunger and hurt are desirable states to be sought after, rather that those who are comfortably off are more likely to rely on their own resources and potentially less likely to seek to know God. This raises the question is it necessary to experience deprivation in some way to truly be ready to seek to know God?

Let me share my own experience and that of one of the families I have cared for.

For the last 30 years, I have been privileged to work as a nurse caring for children who need a bone marrow transplant. It's an area that challenges me both professionally and personally. It's caused me to look deeper into myself, to discover hidden reasons why I want to stay, and also contributed to turning me in a different direction, to becoming ordained.

It's wonderful to look back and see meaning arising out of the difficult times. Just some of the positive blessing to arise from the work I do are that I see if it wasn't for illness, I wouldn't appreciate my own health nearly as much, if it wasn't for the moments of sadness, I wouldn't truly appreciate contentment and joy, if it wasn't for my experience of the dark times, I wouldn't appreciate the light.

Easy for you to say you might be thinking. You're not the one going through the treatment, the anxiety, the bereavement...

None of us can escape life's challenges, and I'd be lying if I did not accept that some families do disintegrate under the pressures they face, but I've also seen others who grow because of them. One family wrote about their experience. In it they describe how their son, who was born with Downs Syndrome was subsequently diagnosed with leukaemia. Spending time with him, their business folded. Not being part of a faith community, they questioned why the God they struggled to believe in, could allow such suffering. They were angry, upset, frightened and feeling helpless. Uncertain where to turn to, his mother picked up a Bible and began to read. What she read, along with the people she revealed her vulnerability to, helped her to see something other than just the pain, and gradually to recognise the blessings in the experience as it unfolded. She found the diagnosis easier to accept the farther they got away from it. Initially, there was too much shock, too much fear and too many tears to even think about blessings. Later, she felt able to have a more positive perspective on the whole thing. She didn't think the cancer, itself, was a blessing, but her experience was that her family received many blessings because of her son's diagnosis.

If I had time I could go through each of the beatitudes and show how their lives were transformed....instead I'll illustrate just a few....how when they thought they were on their own, they discovered the blessing of friends who cared for their other children, how when they had no energy to cook, they received the blessing of meals and when they were in need of comfort, they received the blessing of arms extended and the presence of companions on the journey. Much later, they came to the profound realisation that their years of suffering had actually been a blessing as preparation for the work they were subsequently called to do within the hospital and a faith community.

They understood how parents felt, they could feel their pain, and they were better able to serve them with compassion. The earlier years gained purpose, and with gratitude they became a blessing they hadn't initially seen, and they were once again blessed, and subsequently became a blessing to others.

The beatitudes are at the heart of Christ's message and are a beautiful summary of what Christianity is all about. It's all well and good to hear the blessings and to be seduced by their positive message but we need to remember the challenge Jesus then presents us with. In his life Jesus experienced poverty, not only poverty of deprivation but also poverty of standing alone against hostile crowds and poverty of total reliance on his father. He experienced hunger, not only hunger that is relieved by food, but hunger that can only be satisfied by doing what is right. He knew what it was to weep and mourn the death of a friend and he also knew what it was to mourn about lost opportunities both for himself and

others. Jesus experienced all these things as a result of accepting his calling and fulfilling his vocation.

Jesus does not ask that those who commit their lives to following him have to be poor or hungry, mournful or afflicted but he does ask that we engage with the reality of a broken world and that we fight for truth and justice so that those experiencing the woes of life are able to connect with the hope that one day, their lives could be transformed through the love and grace of God.

Amen

Rev. Shan Rush