

Sermon on Sunday 16 February 2025

by Rev. Alan Stewart

Readings: Jeremiah 17. 5-8 & Luke 6. 20-26

Blessings and Woes

The TV series 'Rich House Poor House' explores how the other half live by swapping the homes, lifestyle and budgets of two families from opposite ends of the economic spectrum. For both families, it's a sobering reminder of the wealth gap that exists in the UK, and at the end of the experiment they meet and reflect on what they've learnt. Sometimes it's about breaking down prejudices (on both sides), and discovering a new-found empathy. Often, it's about a deeper appreciation of the things that money can't buy.

This turning of tables is what lies behind these unsettling words of Jesus in today's reading from Luke. They stand in stark contrast to the more comforting Beatitudes we find in Matthew's account. Luke replaces Matthew's eight blessings with four similar ones, and throws in four woes, or warnings, just to balance things up. Whereas Matthew has Jesus saying a spiritual 'Blessed are the poor *in heart*', Luke goes with the simple 'blessed are the poor'... and the hungry, and the sad and the stigmatised. But wait; woe to the rich, the sated, the laughing and the popular.

Jesus has just come down from the mountain and he's confronted with hoards of the desperately poor and the plain desperate. And that's when he speaks of this reversal of fortune. 'Your day is

coming, you who are poor and hungry and weeping,' he says, 'because this kingdom I'm building will be yours, and you will eat 'til you're full and you will laugh 'til you cry'. That message would have shocked everyone, mainly because that culture believed in karma. Poverty was a punishment from God, and wealth, therefore, a blessing. But here, Jesus doesn't bless the rich. In fact, he does the opposite: 'Woe to you who are rich and full and joyful now,' he says, 'because one day you will hunger and mourn'. Double shock.

The mighty will fall and the fallen will be lifted. That's sobering, to say the least, especially if Jesus' words are also for us today, because by simply living where we live in the world, we are the rich.

We live in a culture that delights in seeing the mighty fall, especially if they're famous. Cancel culture is the new and preferred way of punishing the misdemeanor of mainly celebrities. People are now erased, ostracised, boycotted, shunned (usually through social media), with no way back; no reconciliation, and no forgiveness.

This obviously isn't what Jesus is talking about. His message was, in fact, the opposite of cancelling and shaming people. If anything, he was about cancelling the power of shame. Forgiveness and reconciliation lie at the very heart of who he was and what he practiced. So, what's he getting at here?

Jesus is levelling the playing field where, by an accident of birth, some are more privileged than others. In his kingdom, there are no rich or poor, there's no privilege. Everyone belongs and everyone deserves to have enough.

I don't think we are meant to hear these blessings and woes as a prediction of what will happen to us.

The brilliant Barbara Brown Taylor writes, "Jesus is describing different kinds of people, hoping that his listeners will recognise themselves as one kind or another, and then he makes the same promise to all of them: that the way things are is not the way they will always be. The Ferris wheel will go around, so that those who are swaying at the top, with the wind in their hair and all the world's lights at their feet, will have their turn at the bottom, while those who are down there right now, where all they can see are candy wrappers in the sawdust, will have their chance to touch the stars. It is not advice. It is not even judgment. It is simply the truth about the way things work, pronounced by someone who loves everyone on that wheel." (Barbara Brown Taylor, *Home by Another Way*, 55.)

If you are suffering now, Jesus is saying, it will not always be so. If you are comfortable now, feeling mostly in control, again, it may not always be so.

Like 'Rich House Poor House', Jesus is calling for an empathy and a breaking down of prejudice. More than that, he's saying to both rich and poor; learn from one another. Those who can, lift

up those who can't. Rich and poor alike, as Jeremiah says in his own 'blessings and woes', put your security in God. Like a tree planted by a river, draw strength and goodness and compassion from the one who offers living water.

The Beatitudes are more countercultural than ever. If we look at parts of the Church that claim to follow the example of Jesus, we could rewrite them:

Blessed are the rich, for they shall own the earth.

Blessed are those who lie, for they will create alternative facts.

Blessed are those who blame our problems on the immigrant, for they shall be believed.

A few years back, I wrote my own Beatitudes which began, 'Blessed are the hopeless cases, the lost causes, the misfits, the disposable, for you will be valued in the household of God'. If you could write your own beatitudes, what might you write? Something to chat about over coffee after the service maybe?

I want to leave you with a wonderfully alternative Beatitudes which comes from Dave Tomlinson's prayer book 'OMG: A Bad Christian's Book of Prayers'. Apologies if the first line offends.

Blessed are the give-a-shits – the ones who can't stand idly by while others suffer, or the planet groans.

Blessed are those who laugh at themselves – they will never run out of things to laugh about.

Blessed are those who don't get into social media squabbles – who starve daft people of attention.

Blessed are those who spontaneously decide to pay-forward at a coffee shop, or make up the difference when a shopper hasn't enough at the checkout.

Blessed are the cheesemakers – they make a lot of crackers very happy.

Blessed are those who know the difference between a mountain and a molehill.

Blessed are those who stay human instead of playing God – their life will be a whole lot easier.

Blessed are the cracked – for they let the light in.

