



6th Sunday in Ordinary Time

‘Blessed are you who are poor now.’

If you have been following the news lately you may have read that the gap between the rich and the poor is wider than it has ever been before. Over the decades all sorts of governments and political parties have promised to tackle the gap, to make it possible for people to come out of poverty and climb the social and economic ladder. Sadly, however, poverty is still with us. And with poverty, as we know, come other things: deprivation, despair, illnesses of various kinds, along with a shorter life in some cases. You only have to look at the TV in places where there is famine and you see them: the faces of the hungry, made prematurely old by suffering and disease.

And the gap between rich and poor was at least as extreme, perhaps even more so in Jesus’s day.

If you were a peasant in first century Palestine you would have to come to terms with a life spent on the barest minimum. You rented a bit of inferior land, paid the rent to a rich landowner who kept the best for himself. You did what you could to grow enough to eat and spent all your money on taxes. If you were very lucky, you might live to see forty, but not much more than that. Such was the gap that existed between the upper classes of the day and the rest.

Luke was more than aware of this. He was an educated man who was writing for educated people; in other words, his Gospel was read by the haves of the day as well as the have-nots.

Today’s Gospel will seem familiar. It is Luke’s version of the Beatitudes, which Matthew places in his Gospel in the Sermon on the Mount. But Matthew spiritualises them. In Matthew, you are blessed if you hunger and thirst for righteousness, or if you are poor in spirit. In Luke it is different. Here, you are blessed if you hunger and thirst. Full stop. Here, you are blessed if you are poor. Full stop. Luke is not talking about hunger for justice, he is talking about hunger for food. He is not talking about the poor in spirit, he is talking about the poor in pocket.

Why?

Because, although it is difficult to know for sure what community Luke is writing for, we can infer that he is writing for a group that contains quite a few people from the monied and educated of the world; people of standing, of influence and reputation. Equally, however, there were many who came from the poorest and most despised in society. (Remember how Jesus always associated himself with tax-collectors and prostitutes). For the richer Christians, the cost of discipleship was great indeed. To become a Christian at this time was to risk losing everything in the way of worldly status. To join a persecuted group like this entailed the loss of privileges. No more invitations to the rich houses; they would be shunned and looked down on. Their influence would be gone. Their status would be gone. They had thrown their lot in with the despised and the poor. Very possibly Luke himself had experienced this loss of status, despite his background.

So it is to these two groups, those who were poor to start with, and those who had lost their position in society, that Luke's words are directed. He is saying: 'Don't worry about lost status, lost privilege, lost possessions: you are alongside the poorest of society. Just remember that you are those whom God calls blessed. God is on the side of the vulnerable, the lost and the hungry. He loves those who haven't got two beans.'

This is, of course a challenge to those who are rich in this world's goods. What of them? Throughout the Gospels, we see Jesus constantly challenging those with plenty. He challenges the rich young man. He tells the parable of the rich man and the beggar. The problem with vast amounts of money (and if you are the lucky person to have won £56,000,000 on the euro millions lottery I'm sorry to say it) is that it can harden us. It can make us uncaring towards those who have little. People retreat to closed communities, put up high walls and electronically controlled gates around their houses. Even that is not as bad as the high walls and gates we can put up round our very souls. When that happens we can't see over to the suffering outside; and the heart is hardened and the soul withers.

So. Lent is about to start. Ash Wednesday is this week, signalling the start of that forty day journey to Easter, where sin is acknowledged, where repentance is urged, where reparation is made. We are none of us, thank God, among the super rich. But, even so, we have much more than many in our world. We do not have earthquakes, we do not have crops that can fail, or water that can sicken. Luke is reminding us that God is close to those who suffer poverty and disease. God loves them and calls us to open our hearts, yes, and our wallets and purses too, to them.

Yes, we are lucky that we were not born in Haiti, or Somalia, or Iraq, or any place where is the constant threat of violence or disaster. But the question is not whether we are lucky, but whether we are blessed. And that is the question we need to ask ourselves as we move into Lent.