The kingdom of God is designed to welcome all

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6th Sunday after Epiphany – Jeremiah 17:5-16, Psalm 1, 1 Corinthians 15:12-20, Luke 6:17-26

INTRODUCTION:

Sometimes I think that if Jesus suddenly walked into our Sunday service and started talking, we would be taken aback and shocked at what he had to say. Today's gospel reading from Luke 6:17-26 is a good example of what I am talking about. What if Jesus said to us, *"Woe to you who are rich, for you have received your consolation. Woe to you who are full now, for you will be hungry. Woe to you who are laughing now, for you will mourn and weep. Woe to you when all speak well of you, for that is what their ancestors did to the false prophets."* These are hard words for us to hear. That's why they are rarely preached about in a sermon. But we can't just pick the teaching of Jesus we feel comfortable with. We have got to deal with this hard stuff. So here goes.

POINT 1:

A little context to start with. These verses from Luke's gospel are referred to as the sermon on the plain. There are similar verses in Matthew's gospel referred to as the sermon on the mount which we are more familiar with. Matthew's Jesus talks about 9 blessings and 0 woes. Luke's Jesus talks about 4 blessings and 4 woes.

This plain was somewhere in northern Israel, near the sea of Galilee. There are 3 distinct groups of people present: the 12 apostles, a large group of disciples, and then a group of people who just came out to hear Jesus, some were Jews and

some were Gentiles. After Jesus had healed those who needed healing and cast out unclean spirits, he directed this teaching to his disciples, that is the 12 apostles and the larger group of his followers.

The blessings are directed to those who are poor, hungry, mourning, and hated, excluded, reviled and defamed. Why? Because their circumstances will change drastically. The poor will receive the kingdom of God, the hungry will be filled, those who are weeping will laugh. And those who were hated and excluded will rejoice for their reward is great in heaven.

POINT 2:

Now let's look at the woes. These are directed to people like many of us, the rich, the well-fed, the laughing, and those who are spoken well of. These people Jesus says, have received their consolation. They will be hungry, they will mourn and weep, they are like the false prophets. What does this mean?

Essentially Jesus is identifying those who, whether disciples in the crowd, or living today are determined to satisfy themselves and their needs and status above all else. The poor, the hungry, the excluded and reviled are not their concern really. Someone else can worry about them.

POINT 3:

So, the woes are addressed to those who have not truly understood what I am going to call the upside down kingdom of God. Those who have not comprehended the real message of the gospel of Jesus. And what is that message? It is a theme that pervades all the gospels. The last shall be first, and the first shall be last. The prodigal son is the one rewarded. Or as Mary puts it, *My soul proclaims the greatness of the Lord, my spirit rejoices in God my Savior, for he has looked with favour on his lowly servant……. He has mercy on those who fear him in every generation. He has shown the strength of his arm, he has scattered the proud in their conceit, he has cast down*

the mighty from their thrones, and has lifted up the lowly. He has filled the hungry with good things, and the rich he has sent away empty……

You get the drift of what I am saying. The kingdom of God is designed to welcome all, but most especially those who are misunderstood, outcast, poor, hungry, dispossessed, sick and lost.

And here is the catch. Isn't this all of us at some point in our lives. And so these blessings and woes apply not to 2 groups of people, but to all of us at different times of our lives. For some of us, life is not a struggle, for others it is. But circumstances can change in an instant. We may win the lottery or the stock market may crash. We can feel perfectly well, and then be told we have a devastating illness. We can be looking forward to the birth of a child and then that baby is stillborn. We can be living in the Gaza strip 3 years ago or we can be living in it now.

CONCLUSION:

So what is Jesus trying to teach his disciples, and us, by his sermon on the plain. Why does he include the woes as well as the blessings? Does it have something to do with his listeners, some of whom would have been poor and hungry and others who would have been rich and well fed? I'm not entirely sure. But I do know this much, Jesus is warning those who seem to have a comfortable life that their priorities may be affected by their lifestyle and the influence of God in their lives may become diminished.

So we need to be careful that this does not happen to us, because let's face it, compared to many in the world today we are the rich and the well fed and those who are laughing and well spoken of. But it is when we are poor, and hungry, and weeping and not well spoken of that we begin to understand what Jesus is talking about.