

Blessings and Woes

When you were listening to today's Gospel reading, you may have heard words that were familiar. In Matthew's Gospel this reading is called the Beatitudes or the Sermon on the Mount. Matthew's Beatitudes begins:

When Jesus saw the crowds, he went up the mountain; and after he sat down, his disciples came to him. Then he began to speak, and taught them, saying: (Matthew 5, 1-2, NRSV)

Sermon on the Mount. Makes sense, right?

Now, let's hear from Luke.

Today's reading is from Luke's Gospel and this reading is called the Sermon on the Plain. It begins:

He came down with them and stood on a level place, with a great crowd of his disciples and a great multitude of people from all Judea, Jerusalem, and the coast of Tyre and Sidon.

(Luke 6.17, NRSV)

Sermon on the Plain. Makes sense, right?

As you are likely quite aware there are four gospels. Three are Synoptic Gospels, Matthew, Mark and Luke. They are referred to as Synoptic because they each provide many of the same stories of Jesus. They provide a synopsis of Jesus' birth, death and resurrection, hence Synoptic.

John's Gospel differs from the Synoptic Gospels in several ways: it covers a different time span than the others; it locates much of Jesus' ministry in Judea; and it portrays Jesus discoursing at length on theological matters. The major difference, however, lies in John's overall purpose. The author of John's Gospel tells us that he has chosen not to record many of the symbolic acts of Jesus and has instead included certain episodes in order that his readers may understand and share in the mystical union of Christ's church, that they "may believe that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of God, and that believing you may have life in his name" (20:30). www.brittanica.com

Mark's Gospel was written around the year 70 CE. Fifteen years later, Matthew wrote his Gospel in 85 CE. Luke followed Matthew, at some point between 85 and 95 CE. Both Mathew and Luke would have had access to Mark's writings.

John wrote his Gospel between 95 and 100 CE. John's Gospel is different to the other three in style and language. John's Gospel speaks of immediacy in that he was certain that Jesus would return during his lifetime.

The Synoptic Gospels are strange in that they are not biographies. Each of them is written from a specific, personal narrative, which quite often overlap or mirror the events they witnessed firsthand or heard about shortly thereafter.

To help clarify why they are so different in some areas, consider this: four pedestrians going about their day, waiting at a set of traffic lights. Suddenly there is an accident involving several vehicles. Each person has witnessed the accident in some way, but no-one else has seen the accident from their specific point of view. Now imagine they were ushered away to recount what they witnessed, yet were not permitted to speak with each other. And were not allowed to record their eye-witness account for several years. No wonder there are some things covered by one or two of the Apostles, but not all.

Back to the Beatitudes. Why does Matthew speak of blessings only?

Why does Luke speak of blessings and woes?

There is no straightforward answer, so we're not going to worry about it today. If you wish to engage your own scholarship, please refer to Matthew 5.1-11 and Luke 6.17-26.

Both versions are preceded with words of healing of the crowd. Luke's is written from the perspective of Jesus within arms length of many of those who had come to see him. "And all in the crowd were trying to touch him, for power came out from him and healed all of them." (Luke 6.19, NRSV)

Contrasting that to Matthew's version, Jesus is positioned that he went up the mountain first, and the crowd followed him. Jesus was on the mountain, speaking out to his followers. In Luke's version Jesus came down the mountain WITH his followers, and once they were on level ground he began to teach them.

In Matthew's Beatitudes, there are eight blessings; whereas in Luke's there are four. Luke has four woes, Matthew has none.

Matthew - blessed are the poor in spirit, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven.
Luke - blessed are you who are poor, for yours is the Kingdom of God.

Matthew - blessed are those who mourn, for they will be comforted.

Matthew - blessed are the meek, for they will inherit the earth.

Matthew - blessed are those who hunger and thirst for righteousness,
for they will be filled.

Luke - Blessed are you who are hungry now, for you will be filled.

Luke - blessed are you who weep now, for you will laugh.

Matthew - Blessed are the merciful, for they will receive mercy.

Matthew - Blessed are the pure in heart, for they will see God.

Matthew - Blessed are the peacemakers,
for they will be called children of God.

Notice the differences in narration –

Matthew is recording Jesus speaking in the third person, “they”...

Luke is recording Jesus speaking in the second person, “you”...

Luke has four blessings and four curses which play one off the other.

Blessed are you who are poor, for yours is the kingdom of God.

But woe to you who are rich, for you have received your consolation.

Blessed are you who are hungry now, for you will be filled.

Woe to you who are full now, for you will be hungry.

Blessed are you who weep now, for you will laugh.

Woe to you who are laughing now, for you will mourn and weep.

Both Matthew and Luke conclude with it being a very good thing when you are hated and persecuted because you are a believer. Luke adds that you should leap for joy.

Matthew has eight blessings, the first four are about the listener’s situation and the second four are about the listener’s character.

So we’ll say “thank you and good day” to Matthew as we focus now on Luke.

Luke has Jesus speaking in a very inclusive, personal way. Could it be Jesus is speaking the blessings to his followers, the lessons that they are currently learning and the woes are to those who have not yet heard the good news?

Jesus has always been counter-cultural. He lived in a time when children were not of value until they were old enough to work. Women were not of value unless they could have children - especially male children.

The Pharisees, Sadducees and Samaritans were all about the laws of the land, the rules of the just and pure. The Levitical laws as outlined in Leviticus and Numbers. Jesus, as an adherent Jew, would have known these laws. Don't get me wrong, Jesus was not about anarchy. He was not about ignoring the laws.

Rather, he was about helping the person beyond the laws. Relationships were more important to him than the rules. He showed again and again with the woman at the well, as well as the woman who washed his feet with her tears and anointed them with costly perfume. He showed it with the parable of the Samaritan who helped the injured man. Jesus encouraged women to speak up, as he did with Mary and Martha when their brother Lazarus died.

He also thought it important for women to learn, when he told Martha that he wasn't going to send Mary into the kitchen, but rather that Martha should join her sister in hearing what Jesus had to say. Jesus stopped his disciples from keeping the children from him, and raised Jairus' daughter from the dead.

And so, whether Matthew had it correct or Luke did, really doesn't matter. What we learn from the Blessings and Woes of Luke is that Jesus is about comforting those who have little. And providing a warning that if you are not willing to help those who go without, you will lose your gluttony, in having more than you need taken from you.

If you are mourning, be assured that Jesus will be with you. He does not ever promise to take death away. He does not ever promise that he will end sickness, pain and evil. Rather, he stands beside, holds up and comforts the grieving. And if you are too important or self-absorbed to reach out to those who are in pain; when you find yourself on the top of the world, it will be taken away, as quickly as it was given.

There is an adage that I hear often at funerals "God never gives you more than you can handle." It has been my experience that this is a bald-faced lie. God has given me much more than I can handle on a number of occasions.

And in those moments when I am at my breaking point, when I feel lost and alone, when I am staring out the window at the hospital, I slowly begin to realise that God did give me more than I could handle, yet never abandoned me.

Did those trials make me stronger? I have, honestly, no idea.

I went for a walk yesterday with the mother of two children who both died by suicide within 14 months of each other. How she remains upright is beyond me. And yet, despite everything she has been through, she continues to put one foot in front of the other.

She is planning a trip to Comic-Con with her best friend and her eldest grand-daughter and while she is there, she will scatter some of her daughter's ashes. She is planning a trip to Victoria with her husband to do the same thing. Three weeks ago, these things would have been unimaginable. Two weeks ago, they would have taken every ounce of energy she had. And yet, here she is, making plans. Looking ahead to the future.

While we walked she talked. I listened. Sometimes there was silence. And then she'd talk again. And I'd listen. We spent an hour together, and while we were saying goodbye, I asked if she wanted to meet for a walk again. She said it helped because I wasn't giving her advice or telling her what to do, or telling her she needed to "go back" to what she was before. Well, she can't.

Just as we can't go back to what we were as Church before COVID. We have learned new ways of being community. We have learned new ways of being in communion with one another. Whether online or through blended worship, we have learned to be and continue to be The Church.

And so, after Worship this morning, I will have to love you and leave you because we have the AGM for Christ Church Anglican at 11:30. After that I'm taking my friend out to belatedly celebrate her birthday.

At 2:00 pm I'm planning to watch the Memorial Service for Archbishop Emeritus Desmond Tutu. He was buried in Cape Town on the 1st of January at St. George's Cathedral. The Cathedral Church of St. John the Divine in New York City will be hosting a Memorial Service, where Archbishop Michael Curry, the Primate of the Episcopal Church will be preaching. And their Sending Hymn today? Same as ours: We are Marching - Siyahamba!

Apparently there is also some big Sports Ball Contest this afternoon as well? Something about pig skin or is that pigs in blankets? I hear there are good snacks and some fabulous commercials? I dunno.

Anyway, as I conclude this sermon today, may I ask for your prayers, for myself. Today will be a long day. Tomorrow I have Mark's funeral at 2:00 and visitation for Shirley Hickey at 7:00 pm. Tuesday there will not be Office Hours at Knox as I have the funeral for Shirley Hickey at 11:00 am. Wednesday will be as per usual, Worship and office hours at Christ Church, and Thursday will be Office Hours at Knox.

Lord, I am tired and I need proper rest and strength.
With thanks to God and to all of you.
Let the Church say – Amen.

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