

Jeremiah 17.5-10
Luke 6. 17-26
13th February 2022



Count your blessings

Minister: Gracious God, we open the bible
 and long to receive your word.
 All: **Open, we pray, our minds and hearts
 to receive that word with all its comfort
 and in all its challenge. Amen.**

A church member once told me of his regular first night routine whilst on holiday. He and his wife would often travel in a group or on a cruise and he said as they assembled for dinner over a drink, he'd look around the room and if he noticed a lone traveller looking a bit uneasy with no one to talk to, he'd go up to them and ask if they'd like to join him and his wife on their table at dinner that night and make it their regular place for the ensuing week. He wanted to make them feel welcomed and appreciated. He did this every first night of every holiday. It was such a loving gesture, as astute and it was generous.

I suppose he had a choice at the start of every holiday, whether to repeat this act of kindness or take a less generous approach. He chose the way of thoughtful friendship every time and in doing so he and his wife became a blessing

I don't think we have to invent goodness. It's out there in society and described in story and fable within scripture. But we do have to choose its pathway quite deliberately, thoughtfully, and determinedly.

Today's readings present those pathways, and the compilers of the lectionary showed a certain perception placing Jeremiah 17 next to Luke 7.

Jeremiah is the longest book in the Old Testament in that it has more words in the Hebrew text than any other. It's probably written by more than one author and is never set out in true chronological order.

In Jeremiah 17 the prophet warns against taking a road that relies solely on human rationale and praises instead those who strive to live with the love of God in their hearts. Jeremiah is convinced they have found goodness and chosen its pathway, he likens them to a tree planted by streams of living water.

Luke chapter six charts both pathways, but if we begin with the bad news first Luke speaks of the wrong road taken when people only look out for themselves: the well fed give no thought to the hungry, those who laugh give no time to those who weep, and those who have a dubious reputation do all they can to shore it up regardless of the truth.

This is the reason why some call Luke the *Hard Hitting Gospel* as it doesn't make comfortable reading for some who would consider themselves the most successful in society.

The gospels often present us with a theological and ethical challenge that has the notion of choice within it. We can build our house, so the parable says, on rock or sand, and we can start the journey through a narrow or broad gate. Two ways are before us; a way that is safe, ego centric and inward looking, or one that is riskier, community centric and outward looking. Jesus advocates the later.

Now this section of Luke may have reminded you of Matthew's Sermon on the Mount. It's undoubtedly from the same source. Matthew places this collection of Jesus' teaching on a mountain side. It was his way of saying; what you now read is as important as the original Ten Commandments which Moses received on the Mountain of Sinai.

But Luke's emphasis is different, helpfully so, I think. Instead of the nine beatitudes of Matthew on the Mount, Luke gives us four beatitudes and four woes, all delivered on The Plain.

Is that significant? Tremendously so! Because this level ground was a symbolic place. For Jews at that time level ground represented places of hardship, death, desolation and suffering. It's as if Luke places Jesus' words of hope and challenge into our everyday, ordinary lives. These words are to be lived out in the struggles we face, they are to be made real when life is humdrum and routine; not when we are up on a mountain with a wonderfully exhilarating view, but when we are on the level, plodding through life.

We all need a grounded faith. There's everything right about enjoying worship with friends in church or listening out for God in the silence of a retreat. But these moments of refreshment are there to enable and strengthen us when we too have to walk on the 'level' and encounter hardship, desolation and complex choices.

Take a look at the partners we are supporting this year at AFC through our mission offerings because they are organisation who try to stand by people in those bleak, 'on the level' moments. And these organisations can be the means of God's blessing. So, this year's offering will include agricultural support for the Developing World, Hospice provision in the UK or the offering of safe space for children to meet estranged parents.

So, what blessings does Jesus say are possible for people walking on 'the level'? Or, put another way, when we feel most vulnerable, how does God's peace and strength touch our lives?

Well, there are four blessings or beatitudes in Luke, far fewer than the expanded version in Matthew.

In Luke Jesus talks of those in need, those who are hungry, those who weep and are ostracised, and he says that even in these vulnerable, even scary moments of life, God's blessing can come our way and give us hope.

The first blessing is for the Poor. Often in the Bible that's a way of describing the nation when it was overrun by a powerful oppressor like Rome resulting in a time when national identity and pride were washed away. In these days people felt poor in spirit.

The second blessing was for people who are hungry, which must have been just about everyone in the villages through which Jesus passed and at which he preached. His hearers were predominantly subsistence farmers.

The third was for those who weep, and once again it may have a cultural meaning that's just lost in translation for us. In Jesus' day those who weep were the older folk often feeling anxious and lonely.

The fourth beatitude in Luke seems tailor made for young 1st century churches struggling to become established as Jesus offers a blessing for those who feel ostracised because they have moved away from old traditions and customs.

In an attempt to apply scripture to our context of 2022 I tried rewriting the Lukan beatitudes for today and this is what I came up with:

Blessed are those who are in need, for the kingdom will draw alongside you through the practical compassion of others.

Blessed are you who go hungry, for the kingdom will draw alongside you as your debts are rescinded by the West.

Blessed are you who weep, because the kingdom will draw alongside you in your old age by those in churches, families and communities who will always value you whether you reside at home or in care.

Blessed are you when people hate you, because the kingdom will draw alongside you as together with others who have a sense of God's love and justice, you stand against self-centred popularism and short term gratification.

Of course, 'Blessing' is such a big word. We use it liturgically, we use it as a greeting at the end of emails or conversations, we sense it has both a present and future reality and we understand that the goodness that comes our way through a blessing is both of God and expressed through people.

A line from this morning's final hymn inadvertently, I think, defines God's blessing when it talks of *strength for today and bright hope for tomorrow*. The blessing of God mingles the present and the future.

I must close.

I was getting in my car after walking our dog, Pip, on Chorleywood Common last week and two ladies, an older and younger one were getting into their cars too by Christ Church. The younger one looked up and shouted to the older one *Thank you for being my friend this morning*.

It felt as if she was expressing gratitude for a blessing, one that had come her way through the love and encouragement of a fellow human being. God's love in action through others. And in truth, as I drove off back into Amersham, I felt blessed just by hearing those lovely words: *Thank you for being my friend this morning*.

Or how did that profound piece of theology I learnt at Sunday School put it in a hymn we often sang:
Count your blessings, name them one by one, and it will surprise you what the Lord has done.

So, this week may you be blessed, and be a blessing, in the name of The Father, Son and Holy Spirit. Amen.