

Sermon on 17th February 2019

By John Boylan, Authorised Lay Preacher at All Saints Church Wokingham

Reading: Luke 6.17-26

There can be few of us who can honestly say that our lives have panned out exactly as we planned them. As much as we set ourselves targets and ambitions, life is full of surprises, the twists and turns that do their best to frustrate us and make everything just that little bit harder. But most times we adjust and compensate, reset our targets and target dates and sometimes even convince ourselves that the latest hiccup was actually part of the plan.

But there is an upside. Often those disappointments and pain, rather than defeating us, make us stronger, more resilient, able to learn from mistakes and find better ways to live and do things. If you believe that “all things come from God”, then it is logical to assume that whatever has happened, has happened for a reason. God is giving us a nudge. We’ve talked many times about looking for God in our everyday lives and this is the sort of thing I was referring to. Of course, we don’t always get it right; to quote the well-used phrase “these things are sent to try us”. Even the best-intentioned acts can go wrong.

I am reminded of the story of the three sons and their mother.

Three sons left home, went out on their own and prospered. Getting back together, they discussed the gifts they were able to give their elderly mother for her 80th birthday..

The first said, "I built a big house for our mother."

The second said, "I sent her a Mercedes with a driver."

The third smiled and said, “ You remember how mom enjoyed reading the Bible? And you know she can't see very well. So, I sent her a remarkable parrot that recites the entire Bible. It took monks 12 years to teach him. He's one of a kind. Mama just has to name the chapter and verse, and the parrot recites it."

Soon afterwards, the mother sent out her letters of thanks:

"Milton," she wrote to number one son, "The house you built is so huge. I live in only one room, but I have to clean the whole house."

"Gerald," she wrote to her second son, "I am too old to travel. I stay at home most of the time, so I rarely use the Mercedes. And the driver is so rude!"

"Dearest Donald," she wrote to her third son, "You have the good sense to know what your mother likes.

The chicken was delicious."

Fortunately, God has given us a template to work with and Scripture provides us many examples of God’s guiding hand. A few weeks ago, I talked about Jesus setting out his mission when he preached at the synagogue in Nazareth; bringing “good news to the poor...release to the captives...sight to the blind and (letting) the oppressed go free”.

Today we get further guidance in Luke’s less famous version of the Beatitudes that are found in Matthew. But although both may sound similar, there is a big difference. Matthew’s Beatitudes demand “*an ethical righteousness, the radical nature of which far exceeds that of the (existing religious) law*” (Barton 2001). Matthew offers a spiritualised version, for example “Blessed are the poor in spirit” and Blessed are those who hunger and thirst for righteousness”. Luke’s version, whilst still being radical, offers a more simple and focussed

view of established reality; “Blessed are you who are poor” and “Blessed are you who hunger now”.

Luke is not calling us to new behaviours but focusses on the nature of the community that Jesus is calling into being, a community that will respond with mutual love, tolerance and acceptance. One can already start to see the timelessness of these cornerstones, and their relevance to our contemporary society. Two thousand years later do we now live in a country or even community that demonstrates love, tolerance and acceptance?

Whereas Matthew sets out a moral and ethical code that everyone should aspire to attain, Luke demands a more practical and basic approach to life; love, a non-judgemental attitude, a life of integrity and a total response to Jesus’ call.

Interestingly Jesus does not say to sell everything and give it to the poor although he does later in Luke 18.22 demand that of the wealthy man interested in eternal life. But in this community, sharing and generosity are the emphasis and not being possessed by possessions. In such a community the rewards will come. The hungry will have food, the community will accept those who are ostracised or marginalised and those who stand up for their faith, enduring persecution, ridicule or rejection will be rewarded in the kingdom. Luke also goes on to say that those who are like the ‘false prophets of old’ will be punished.

Now this last one is a bit strange after all the good news and almost out of context. Forgiveness rather than punishment is Jesus’ philosophy. But Luke has positioned his ‘Beatitudes’ after a series of Jesus’ teaching and healing miracles, all of which brought Jesus into conflict with the Priests and Pharisees. So, it is not surprising that Luke is a bit aggressive and he describes Jesus singling out the wealthy and contented with four warnings or woes. It is a pattern in Luke to emphasise that the Kingdom of God will be a reversal of the established norms of kingdoms on earth. Think of Mary’s Magnificat where she describes how God will “put down the mighty from their seat and the rich he will send empty away”.

But do all the rich deserve a bad press. And of course the answer is no and in Deut 28.1-14 there is even a long list of riches and blessings that will come to those who ‘obey the Lord your God’. But the Gospel stories normally focus on those in need and there is a real feeling in Luke, and I suspect in our contemporary society that for many, spiritual sensitivity may be inversely proportional to financial prosperity. We need God more when things are not going well. And the knock on to that is that our compassion for the needy may wax when we ourselves are needy. Maybe this is where Luke is aiming.

But it should also be remembered that Luke’s church was in the middle of persecution particularly by the traditional guardians of the law, the Scribes and Pharisees. It’s a moot point, but it may seem a bit disingenuous to criticise these groups as they were after all striving to maintain the integrity of the established law of Moses. However, their intransigence is shown repeatedly throughout all the gospels and they do not get a good press. As often happens in public office their concern to protect the law had become over-riding to the point where it became more important than the law itself. There was no room for interpretation or debate and certainly no attempt to understand or consider alternative interpretation even if some of the laws were clearly out of date. Jesus wasn’t the first to stand against the system and prophets throughout the Old Testament had consistently tried to move from the rigid legal system to one of compassion. If they had been successful it would of course have made it easier for everyone and prepared the way for Jesus. But the

Scribes and Pharisees were only concerned with maintaining the status quo and of course their position in society which of course positioned them firmly against Jesus.

Finally, I just want to draw attention to one of the woes because it is particularly relevant in our current political situation. It's the final one, "Woe, when men speak well of you, for their fathers did the same thing to the false prophets". It's a fact of life that many will speak well of those who agree with them or who may give favours in return for support or flattery. Luke is arguing that God however judges by a different standard, that he raises up those who speak the truth rather than the 'false prophets' who speak what people want to hear. An interesting thought to ponder over the next month.

So, the message for today is the practical approach Jesus demands in today's reading; establish the kingdom of God on earth by setting up communities of love, tolerance and acceptance. Be non-judgemental and share your gifts with others. Above all listen and respond to the call of God. So, what do we think? Is this the kind of community you would like to live in? If it is, the answer is in all our hands.

Amen.