

Sunday November 6, 2022

Year C - 6th Sunday after Epiphany (Luke 6.17-26)

Little Ruthie is a mischievous little girl in a cartoon strip. In one strip, Ruthie decided that someone should write a guidebook on how to get into heaven, and since she wasn't aware of anyone having done so, she would do it herself. Unfortunately, all she could think of was "you won't get into heaven if you spit on people, – unless they're on fire, then it's OK." Now, if Ruthie had been with us yesterday for Children's Church, she would have heard the Beatitudes, and made a start there. After all, a lot of people DO think of Beatitudes as a guidebook for getting into heaven.

"Blessed are you..." Such familiar words! But we are much more familiar with "Blessed are the poor in heart" aren't we? And the tune that goes with those words springs to mind right away. But it doesn't say that. And it's not just a different translation. It's a different gospel.

"Blessed are the poor in heart" is how Matthew starts his version of the Sermon on the Mount. Luke refers to the same event as the Sermon on the Plain, and words it very differently. But whether the actual event took place up a hillside or down on the flats doesn't really matter, and the passages start out sounding very similar.

They start out sounding similar, but there are quite a lot of differences.

- Matthew lists 9 states of being that seem like misfortunes but are really blessings. Luke lists only 4: being poor, being hungry, being sad, and being outcast.
- Matthew says "*poor in spirit*", but Luke says just "*poor.*"
- Matthew says "*hungry for justice*", but Luke says just plain "*hungry.*"
- Matthew lists rewards for each one of the 9 blessings in his list, but Luke offers no rewards at all. Instead, Luke, offers woes: WOE to those who are **not** poor; WOE to those who are **not** hungry; WOE to those who are **not** sad; WOE to those who are **not** outcasts.

A lot of people really DO take the Beatitudes as a guide for getting into heaven, and although Matthew's version is more comforting and cheerful, such people often opt for Luke's version, and end up believing that only the downtrodden and destitute will get into heaven. Only the poor and the victimized. And anyone who is comfortable or happy now can expect to be punished for it later.

But if we assume that both gospels are reporting the same teaching, how can they be so different? And does that mean one is wrong and one is right? Or does it have more to do with the great gulf of time and culture that lies between us and them?

Our gospels are 2,000 year-old texts, written long after the events they report, and passed along by word of mouth only for ages before they were written down. There's no one left that speaks the language they were told in, and there's no one left who speaks the language they were first written down in either. The cultural, historical and literary contexts are quite alien to us. On top of that, the messages in the gospels were crafted for specific audiences.

Matthew was speaking to Jews who shared a common understanding of God, but Luke was speaking to outsiders: people from all over, with no common cultural background: the poor; the marginalized; people with no hope. No point talking to them about scriptures they'd never heard of, and couldn't read anyway. Every different audience needed to know what the words of Jesus meant to them.

Our four gospels tell their stories differently. Ironically, the fact that they DO tell the same stories differently is a good reason for believing they are true. Any detective – or devoted mystery fan – can tell you that whenever the witnesses agree on a story, it means for sure that they collaborated in making it up. Witnesses never agree. They always see things differently and hear things differently. And the more time goes by, the more those memories diverge. (It happens all the time in families, doesn't it?)

And just to add another complication, every new generation imposes its own social and political orientations on scripture, and looks at it through the fashions of the day. People can always find something, somewhere, in scripture that they can use to support almost any point of view they want to justify. And this piece from Luke has a lot to answer for on that front.

These verses from Luke justified the “pie in the sky” philosophy: the notion that the poor and hungry are going to get their reward in heaven anyway, so they’re the lucky ones and we shouldn’t interfere with God’s plan by helping them.

These verses also justified the “hair shirt” approach to life, which argues that the only way to get into heaven is to give up all comfortable things. Go hungry, Make yourself an outcast, deny yourself all pleasures, and even wear an itchy shirt so you can be uncomfortable all the time. Human history has seen whole movements built on deliberately living in misery, because it’s a sure-fire ticket to heaven.

But in the bit that comes next, Luke goes on to say that what’s important in life is to treat others with kindness, compassion and charity, and if there is such a thing as a ticket to heaven, that’s it. It is every person’s responsibility to look out for every other person. The more fortunate you are, the bigger the obligation you carry.

The good news for the poor and the hungry, the destitute and the outcast, was that your misery won’t last for ever. But the same applied to the comfortable who chose to ignore them: that wouldn’t last for ever either. The unfortunate needed to know that God hadn’t abandoned them in their misery. And the more fortunate, who enjoyed their advantages and didn’t care about anyone else, needed to learn that we are all responsible for one another.

Luke was not saying that you have to be downtrodden and destitute to get into heaven.

Nor was he saying that being comfortable or happy is an automatic disqualification. In the end, it's not about what the world has done to you, or how much or how little you have been given. It's all about what you do with it.

A very wealthy man was once asked to make a donation to a charity appeal. "I can understand why you approached me," he said. "I do have a great deal of money, and I know your charity does good work. But do you have any idea how many demands there are on my money? My mother needs 24 hour nursing care. My sister is a widow struggling to raise 8 children on her own. I have one son in a drug rehab clinic and another doing voluntary work in an African village that doesn't even have a well. All of these people make demands on my money, and since I don't give a cent to any of them, what on earth makes you think I might give some to you?"

In the end, it's not about what the world has done to you, or how much or how little you have. It's all about what you do with it. Amen.