

An Upside Down World
Luke 6:17-26
February 24, 2019

Most of us are familiar with what is called the Sermon on the Mount which we find in Matthew's gospel. But Luke also has a mini version of the sermon, but it is slightly different. Luke captures it this way:

***The poor are favoured, because yours is the Kingdom of God;
Those who hunger now are favoured, because you will be filled;
Those who weep now are favoured, because you will laugh;
You are favoured, when people hate you and when they exclude you and
censure you.***

Luke tells us that a great crowd had gathered: the 12 and the wider circle of his followers, as well as others who came from Jerusalem, and the distant coastal towns of Tyre and Sidon.

These were ancient Phoenician seaport cities located on the coast in what today is southern Lebanon. These were sophisticated cities whose Phoenician traders established colonies all around the Mediterranean Sea. Tyre became a grand city, as evidenced today by the remains of its Arch of Triumph. Their presence in Galilee tells us just how far Jesus' reputation as Rabbi and healer had spread.

Jesus' words were not just theoretical. He himself has experienced hunger, rejection and exclusion from his early years as the illegitimate son of Mary. Who his father might be is whispered throughout the village of Nazareth and beyond. This scandal is borne on the wind even to Jerusalem where we find his opponents raising it against him. Poverty and hunger wasn't foreign to Jesus. On his journeys following John the Baptist throughout the wilderness area of Jordan he had know first hand privation of every kind. This is the world he has known personally.

When John the Baptist sent messengers to ask Jesus if he was indeed the one they had waited for notice Jesus' reply: ***the blind receive their sight, the lame walk, the lepers are cleansed, the deaf hear, the dead are raised, the poor have good news brought to them.***

Hundreds of Jewish people were lumped among the “unclean” and “outcasts” by the religious leaders. Those were people who had skin diseases, who worked for the Romans collecting taxes, and who earned their money as prostitutes. It was with these folk, the despised underbelly of society that Jesus seems to eat and drink with, not the self righteous, religious crowd at the synagogue, or up at the temple in Jerusalem. One day the Pharisees asked his disciples why Jesus ate with tax collectors and sinners. Jesus’ response on that occasion (Luke 5:30-32): *I have come to call not the righteous but sinners to repentance.*

The history of the church is filled with many examples of amazing work amongst the poor and forgotten of the world. The hospitals, schools, orphanages, soup kitchens were formed by Christians long before it was picked up by social reformers of the past two centuries. Sure, the history of the church is not all in technicolour; much is dark and shadowy. But much is also inspiring and positive.

These words in Luke’s Sermon on the Mount continue a theme begun by Mary’s Magnificat. Remember her song: ***He has brought down the powerful from their thrones and lifted up the lowly; he has filled the hungry with good things, and sent the rich away empty.***

Why does Jesus direct so much of his ministry to the outcasts and the poor? Perhaps we need to complete the sermon before we answer this. Woes follow the blessings: Woe to the rich, to those who are full now, who are laughing now, and who are praised now. Those who seemingly are on top of the heap, kings of the hill, as Sinatra sings, are to experience a great reversal. Just as Mary sang, the powerful, the rich, the beautiful people who have turned their backs on the poor and outcasts, will find life reversed in the future kingdom.

Jesus tells his hearers, and Luke tells the early churches and through his gospel he tells us today, that poverty, hunger and tears somehow make us more receptive to God’s good news. The Message perhaps captures this best:

You’re blessed when you’ve lost it all. God’s kingdom is there for the finding.

***You're blessed when you're ravenously hungry. Then you're ready for the Messianic meal.
You're blessed when the tears flow freely.
Joy comes in the morning.***

One of the realities for many of us who live in the developed countries of the East and West is that we are so full we have no need or time for God. I felt this so acutely when I visited Japan. The flashing neon signs, the cutting edge technology, the speedy trains that ran like clockwork and the successful corporate culture, were all very impressive. But in the chaos of Tokyo's streets I also saw the men in dark suits returning from work at midnight.

Many have sold their souls to the corporation, with all the accompanying stress that brings. I'm told alcoholism is high among this business class. My sense of Japan was that of a country that had little soul, with only a modicum of spiritual life once a year on the day they celebrate their ancestors. There is a palpable emptiness in modern western and eastern capitalist countries. John Wesley spoke of prosperity as "a sweet poison"

The point of the Jesus' sermon is not that he hates rich people. The point is that, "The times, they are a changin'." The mighty will be cast down and the lowly lifted up. How does the rule of God in our lives change our attitude to money, to mission, to support of the needy? The values articulated here are upside down from what society follows as the path to the good life.

This world may not be our home, but it is the place we are to live out these kingdom values. The point is that these values, this upside down world is not simply future. Final reckoning certainly is future, but there are real consequences now for our choices. This sermon is not just a prediction of the reversal in the judgment, but a call to discipleship in the here and now for Jesus' followers. We ourselves are to be agents of God's compassion and good news.

Amen

