

Sermon – Luke 6.12-26

Let the words of my mouth and the meditations of our hearts be acceptable to you, O Lord my rock and my redeemer. Amen.

This week, I have been basking in the glow of last Sunday's baptism service. So many elements made it special. Little Theo who was remarkably calm through the whole process, the pouring of the water of baptism with our new silver ewer, and the blessing of the water, this symbol of life, refreshment and new beginnings, Arch giving us the gift of live music, and Leon's sermon based on the text of Jesus calling his first disciples. And this call to discipleship continues in our Gospel reading today. Today we not only have Jesus appointing his 12 apostles, we also have his first sermon, Luke's version of the material that Matthew crafted as the Sermon on the Mount. For both Luke and Matthew, this piece of scripture starts the first major discourse by Jesus in his early public ministry. And Luke's hard-hitting version reflects both his focus on universal salvation and his call to radical discipleship that is reflected again and again through his Gospel. So today, let's take a fresh look at blessings and woes, and see how they might apply to us, here in our world.

Last week, we had Jesus in chapter five calling his first disciples, most notably Simon Peter, and also John and James. This week in chapter six, he's attracted a whole group of disciples, and more, who come to see him, hear him and be healed by him. He has a power that comes out of him. But our reading starts off with "he went out to the mountain to pray; and he spent the night in prayer to God." Jesus praying is a central motif in Luke's gospel.

It happens with regularity throughout the Gospel and often at significant moments: at his baptism, in this reading before appointing his 12 apostles, at the Transfiguration, and most famously on the Mount of Olives on the night before his death. Prayer is central to Jesus' ministry. Developing the relationship with God, his father, investing the time to do the deep work of the soul, is part of who Jesus is, is part of his mission. How often do we commit the time to reflect, to meditate, to pray, both at times of significant life events, and also during the normal pattern of daily life? I'm currently reading a beautiful book given to me for my birthday last year called "Seven Sacred Pauses". It's written by a Benedictine nun and contains reflections based on the seven hours of prayer in a monastic life. Now you might think that the monastic life bears no resemblance to the hurly burly of daily living but she observes about the mid morning prayer time known as Terce: "the mid-morning recess is a gift to yourself – a wordless prayer in the midst of your work. Spend a few moments of attentive breathing. Be aware of the state of your mind and bless the work of your hands. Be gracious with yourself and be grateful that you remembered to pause." It's got me thinking and I decided that around 10am each day, I'm going to mindfully give myself 5 minutes, to be attentive to myself and to God. It's just too easy to rush around each day preoccupied with the business of it all and ignore the presence of God. Why don't you try it too?

But back to our scripture! So Jesus spends the night in prayer with God and the very next day he chooses from his broad group of disciples, twelve that he calls Apostles. And I think it's worth dwelling for moment, on the significance of the number 12. You might remember back in Old Testament times Jacob, also known as Israel, in covenant with God, had 12 sons whose descendants became known as the 12 tribes of Israel, after they escaped from Egypt under the leadership of Moses. And in choosing 12 Apostles,

Jesus chose 12 leaders of the new mission to reframe Israel as the new kingdom, the new community of God. The symbolism of the number 12 would not have escaped the Jewish audience of the day. And when we look at what happens in the very next few verses, we see that Luke is positioning Jesus' first sermon, his charge if you like, something like the Archbishop's charge at the beginning of a synod, to his Apostles, to his broader group of disciples, in the presence of the multitude of people that had gathered from all of Judea, Jerusalem, and the coast of Tyre and Sidon. And Jesus stands on the plain. He's come down from the mountain and onto the flat lands and is surrounded by his 12 Apostles and his crowd of disciples, who are in turn surrounded by the multitude who have come to hear Jesus and who have come for healing. For Jesus is a person of power. Luke says the power came out from him and healed all of them. And it is among this mass of burdened and afflicted humanity, people longing to access his healing and liberating power, that Jesus gives this first sermon. Luke wants us to hear this sermon in this context, Jesus surrounded by his inner group, and by his broader disciples, and then surrounded by humanity, the poor, the sick, the displaced, all who want to touch Jesus, to be healed and to be saved.

And into this scene, Jesus looks at his disciples and says:

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

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

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

In a series of provocative oxymorons, the holding together of two clashing ideas, Jesus challenges the normal order of society and he goes on to mirror these so called blessings with clashing woes:

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

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

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

What is he trying to do here? Is it a bad thing to be rich? Society doesn't seem to think so! Is it a good thing to be poor? And Luke's version of this sermon is more direct and punchier than Matthew's. Matthew's opens with “blessed are the poor in spirit” which takes us in a very different direction. Luke doesn't spiritualize poverty in this way. To understand Luke's approach we need to remember that his Gospel is about universal salvation, radical reversal and call to discipleship. This approach is stated up front in chapter 1 in Mary's Song, the Magnificat, which we heard during Advent, when Mary was pregnant with Jesus. In it, she says to her kinswoman Elizabeth, about God:

“He has shown strength with his arm; he has scattered the proud in the thoughts of their hearts.

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.”

In this context, Luke's blessings and woes, make more sense. For Luke, being poor, hungry or reviled, being vulnerable, gives God plenty of room for action. Jesus is not endorsing poverty or hunger or exclusion, Jesus is recognizing it and insisting that what most people reckon to be advantages and disadvantages in this world, will be qualified and even reversed in view of the coming action of God. The blessings and woes are provocative for both rich and poor, but they do not suggest that the poor should be content with their lot and passively accept it. Luke's God is a God of social justice, a God with an impulse to save, a God whose overflowing generosity can fill the gap created in peoples' lives by poverty, sickness and exclusion. A God who brings salvation and grace today for all who ask, who need, who hope.

So how do we process these blessings and woes, we who are so privileged to be living in this beautiful place, worshipping in this beautiful church? I think the blessings and woes are a strong statement of God's action in our lives. When we are vulnerable God steps in and this is a great message to send to our broader community. So just like Jesus preaching on the plain, to his apostles and disciples surrounded by humanity who are all looking for something, we too can craft our messages of how God has stepped into our lives in our vulnerability, and invite the people who surround us into a relationship with Jesus. It's food for thought as we approach our Vision Day in two weeks' time.

But the blessings and woes are just the beginning of Jesus' first sermon. Next week we will hear the second part which talks about love, the new way of being that Jesus brings into discipleship. Jesus is creating a new community, a new Israel, a new way of life for the Christian. And although we all hope to see the fullness of God's splendid reality in the next world,

there is no getting away from Jesus' challenge to each and every one of us, to be children of the kingdom of God now, rejoicing in God, loving our brothers and sisters and being holy and prayerful within ourselves.

Let us pray.

Loving and life giving God, we give you thanks that you are a God of social justice who comes into our lives in our vulnerability. Guide and help us as we approach our Vision Day, to discern our future and grow our community with love in your name, confident in expressing ourselves as your people.

In Jesus name we pray, Amen.