The Sermon on the Mount
Luke 6:17-26

Last Sunday we saw how Jesus, before choosing the 12 disciples, spent an entire night, out on a mountainside, in prayer. This morning's passage opens with Luke telling us in v17 that Jesus 'came down with them and stood on a level place.' And then he begins to teach the crowds. And what he teaches them is pretty similar to what we know as The Sermon on the Mount in Matthew's gospel. But if you read the two sermons together, you'll see that whilst they're similar, they're not identical. And you might wonder, are these two different sermons, or the same sermon? And if they're the same, why do they seem to differ as much as they do? Well, not only does the content of the sermon differ somewhat, so does the location. Matthew records Jesus delivering the sermon up on the mountain, while Luke tells us that Jesus delivered this sermon having come down the mountain.

So, is there some kind of discrepancy here? And the answer's 'no'. Jesus was always preaching and teaching and like any preacher Jesus likely preached the same message more than once. I think it was George Whitfield, the famous preacher during the Great Awakening of the 18th Century, who said that 'if a sermon was worth preaching once, it was worth preaching 40,000 times!' Now, if I tried that here, you'd have something to say about it. But with Jesus it's very different. You could listen to this one over and over again.

And yet, before Jesus starts teaching this crowd, there are their needs to attend to.

Why do people come to Jesus?
These crowds are coming from all over to see Jesus. Luke tells us in v17 that they're coming 'from all Judea [that's the whole countryside] and Jerusalem [which is towards the South] and the seacoast of Tyre and Sidon [to the north]'. And there were masses of them. His disciples, those who followed him around, were by now a 'great crowd', Luke says, and on top of them was this 'great multitude' of people.

But why were they coming? What would make these people trek considerable distances on foot to go to see Jesus? What's in it for them? Well, Luke tells us: v18 they came 'to *hear* him and to be *healed* of their diseases.'

You see, there was something about Jesus - what He taught and the way He taught it, that was just magnetic to people. There was simply no one like Him. And they flocked to hear Him. But not just to hear Him. To be healed by Him as well. And they'd crowd around him Luke says, trying to touch Him, because power was coming from Him, and healing them. And Luke picks out for special mention those who were troubled by unclean spirits. These spiritual forces of darkness that seek to destroy and wreck lives and Jesus goes into battle against them.

So people were coming to hear Him, but also to be healed by Him, to be made whole again. And I don't think it's any different today. There might be some of us who come to Christianity because it seems to make intellectual sense, which it does. But I suspect most people come to Christianity because they know that something's missing, you might have felt some kind of inner emptiness that you

can't really put your finger on, or someone feels a need for something that they don't have and they know the answer lies outside of themselves, that might be meaning in life, or forgiveness of sins. Or maybe you saw something in the lives of your Christian friends: you're not sure what it was to start with, but you knew you didn't have it and thought 'I want that'. Or maybe it's this deep inner sense of longing and wanting to make sense of the world and of life. And those are simply expressions of our desire for things to come right, to be put right: for wholeness.

And yet, Jesus doesn't leave the crowd there. He doesn't leave them at the level of their felt-need. He takes things to another level, because there is more to Jesus' mission than simply lining up to get healed. And with this enormous crowd around Him, Jesus sets about turning the world upside down and He takes what we think a sorted, full, blessed, whole, life would look like and He turns it on its head.

A different kind of Kingdom

As He opens up this sermon, Jesus contrasts two very different visions of what it means to be blessed. Two different kingdoms with different visions and values of what the whole, blessed life of its citizens will look like. And because Jesus is Jewish and steeped in the Old Testament, when He talks about being blessed He's talking about this sense of inner happiness and contentment, that sense of inner joy at experiencing God's favour on your life, of walking in His ways, of finding your refuge and your trust in Him.

And the strange thing is, that blessed life, Jesus says, does not look like what you think it should look like. Between v20-26 Jesus gives 4 pairs of different circumstances you might find yourself in: being poor or rich, being hungry or full, experiencing weeping or laughing and being hated or well thought of. And we would look at that list and think the blessed person, the person who has God's hand on their life, the person who's going to know inner joy and satisfaction is the person with the money, who's got a full stomach and can afford to buy meat in Switzerland, who is happy and who everyone thinks well of, who's famous and everyone likes, he's the blessed person.

And Jesus says – no, you are so wrong. In fact, that person deserves your pity, Jesus says: woe to the rich and the full and the laughing and those who are well spoken of. The really blessed person is the poor, the hungry, the weeping and the hated.

And that is just so counter-cultural to everything we would think that we need to try and work out what Jesus is getting at here.

Well, just think… who is He saying this to? Jesus tells this to this crowd who are coming to him for healing and wholeness, and these 4 pairs of blessing and woes: blessed are you who are poor, woe to you who are rich; blessed are you who are hungry, woe to you who are full; blessed are you who weep, woe to you who laugh; blessed are you when people hate you, woe to you when all people speak well of you; these 4 pairs represent the very areas where people try and find their sense of well being, their significance, their success, their identity from: money, comfort, power and popularity. And you might be tempted to think if I

can just achieve these, I'll be ok. If I get enough money, or sort this area out, or give myself to pursuing this, I'll satisfy my heart longing for more in life. But Jesus says, that's not where you'll find satisfaction. You're not going to find true blessing or wholeness in riches, comfort, power or popularity. The celebrity culture, or the well to do middle class lifestyle, will never give you that. And even if you do find it, it's only temporary. Because that kind of life is all about now and life is far more than just *now*.

Let's look at each of these four in turn:

Riches
V20: Blessed are you who are poor, for yours is the kingdom of God; v24 But woe to you who are rich, for you have received your consolation.

Now, nowhere does the Bible suggest that grinding poverty is somehow godly. The Bible tells us you can be poor for different reasons: like injustice, or oppression or because of your own foolishness. But when the Bible talks about the poor like Jesus does here, more often than not it's talking about the godly poor. The poor who know they need God; who are looking to God to provide for them and to defend them and to fight their corner. That's why when Matthew records his sermon on the mount, he records Jesus as saying 'blessed are the poor in spirit.'

Now, why are you blessed if you're poor like that? Because, Jesus says, 'yours is the kingdom', not some future pie in the sky when you die; but now. Yours is the Kingdom *now*. And we might think, 'I'd be blessed if I was rich'. And Jesus says, 'No – you're blessed being poor: Knowing you need God, knowing you haven't arrived, knowing you're poor in spirit, knowing you don't have all the answers but you cling to Jesus, you're trusting God and knowing that money is not the answer – you're blessed, because you are a citizen of God's kingdom.'

But the rich, Jesus says, they aren't blessed at all. In fact, woe to them. Now why might Jesus see such riches as woe? Because when you're rich, as all of us in this room are, you're tempted to be self-sufficient; to think you're something in life; to think you don't need God. There is a kind of self sufficient arrogance that can come with riches. And the values of the rich are so counter to the values of God's Kingdom and what matters in that Kingdom, that Jesus says 'that's not a blessing.' And the reason Jesus gives for saying that is 'for you have received your consolation.' You've already got it. The rich already have what they are looking for, they've got their reward. You've got your stuff, your possessions, your house, your holidays, Jesus says, and that's *all* you're going to get. In fact the term Jesus uses for 'you have received' is a technical term for accepting a receipt for payment given: like having a bill stamped 'paid in full'. You've got it, you've been paid. And there's nothing more to come in the future. The rich person's wealth is it.
Now, if this life is all there is, you might be happy to live with that. But what if it's not all there is? If this life isn't all there is, you seriously don't want all of your consolation, your reward, this side of the judgment.

No, the blessed man, Jesus says elsewhere, is the guy who finds this treasure hidden in a field – the Kingdom of God - and sells all that he has to buy that field so he can get that treasure. He would rather have Jesus than anything else, and he is prepared to give away all this other stuff and use it for God's glory, because he loves Jesus more, than miss out on the kingdom. He's the blessed man, Jesus says, because he understands what is supremely valuable.

So wholeness and satisfaction and blessing aren't found in riches. But neither are they in comfort.

Comfort
V21: Blessed are you who are hungry now, for you shall be satisfied; v25 woe to you who are full now, for you shall be hungry.

Now, nowhere does the Bible suggest that famine is a good thing. But someone who's hungry is hungry for something. And the people listening to Jesus no doubt knew what hunger felt like. They knew what it was to *feel* hunger for food. But they also knew spiritual hunger. And what they were being fed was the religion of the Pharisees. And that kind of rule-based religion never satisfies. And when Matthew records his Sermon on the Mount he has Jesus saying 'blessed are those who hunger and thirst for righteousness': A hunger to be satisfied in your soul. And Jesus says, 'if that's you, you're blessed'. You're blessed if the circumstances of your life, even physical hunger, even physical needs cause you to seek real fulfillment in God. Because you will be satisfied.

But the opposite side of that is those who are full, who are already satisfied, who think they already have what life can offer them, and feel no hunger, who feel no need for Jesus, who are happy in their 'I've got everything I want now'-kingdom. And Jesus says, they're the ones to pity, because whilst they are full now, the time is coming when they will hunger. You see, even in this life the stuff we can find our comfort and satisfaction in can disappear like sand through the fingers. And if that's what we've built our sense of well being on, and it runs out - we're going to find it lacking. But worse still would be to discover that this life isn't all there is and future happiness, future contentment is sacrificed for short term gains.

So Jesus says you don't find true satisfaction or blessing in riches or comfort, but neither do you in power.

Power
V21: 'Blessed are you who weep now, for you shall laugh'; v25: 'Woe to you who laugh now, for you shall mourn and weep.'

Now, you may hear that and think, what's that got to do with power? Well, when Jesus says 'woe to you who laugh', Luke uses a word for laughter that's not a pleasant kind of laughter. It has these overtones of bragging, and boasting; of laughing at someone else's misfortune, of laughing when someone else is mourning. This is the laugh of the politician: the kind of laughter when you've just won the election and defeated your opponent. It's the laugh of power: you're in control and everything's under control, you're the winner and nothing can touch you.

And we can be tempted to think: if only I had control over this or that; if only this or that was sorted in my favour, I'd be happy. And Jesus says, 'no, power and control is not where true blessedness lies.' There *is* a joy – a shallow joy in having and possessing now, of being in power *now*, of being on top *now*. But Jesus says that kind of joy will later turn to mourning for what is lost forever, because this life isn't all there is – and if you just live for now, you may laugh in triumph now, but the time will come when you're not going to be laughing.

So don't envy them. It's those who weep, Jesus says, who see the world as it really is, and it brings tears to their eyes. Who sense something of God's heart for the world, and know that the answer isn't in them, but in Jesus, they're the blessed ones, Jesus says, because the day is coming when things will be put right, and then they'll laugh. Because the kind of power that ultimately brings satisfaction, that ultimately brings fulfillment, isn't ours at all, it's His.

So true wholeness and satisfaction, true blessing in life doesn't come with riches, or comfort or power, but neither, Jesus says, does it come with popularity.

Popularity

V22-23: Blessed are you when people hate you and when they exclude you and revile you and spurn your name as evil on account of the Son of Man! Rejoice in that day, and leap for joy, for behold, your reward is great in heaven; for so their fathers did to the prophets; V26 woe to you, when all people speak well of you, for so their fathers did to the false prophets.

Now, the world –certainly our western societies - is obsessed by celebrity and fame. Magazines and TV shows are given over to it. But even unknowns like you and I are not immune to this pull of popularity. We want to be liked. We want to be popular. We want people to say nice things about us, and our sense of self-worth feeds off what other people think of us. And we can look at the person who everyone likes and think: that's the really blessed person, I wish I was like them. And Jesus says, no, you're wrong.

You see in the new Kingdom, popularity isn't everything. Because for everyone to like you, in the end, you've got to sacrifice truth. Which is what the false prophets did. The false prophets told everyone what they wanted to hear, so everyone liked them. But Jesus turns that upside down and says, that's not what it means to be blessed. The blessed person, in Jesus' kingdom, is, ironically, the person who has enemies. The blessed person is the one who is ostracized and excluded; who is criticized and whose name is slandered.

But if you're going to be hated, make sure you're hated for the right reasons! It's not about being hated because you're obnoxious, and you get up people's noses like a self-righteous Pharisee; or because you're judgmental or critical or dour or boring. It's about being hated because you love Jesus – it's on account of the Son of Man, Jesus says. You've taken sides, you've transferred your allegiance from one kingdom to the other. And Jesus promises you: that will get you into trouble, that will bring down hatred upon your head. 'If you will follow me you will have plenty of friends, but you're also going to make some enemies'. But that's ok

because your reward is great in heaven. And knowing that is liberating: because it frees you to speak the truth, unlike false prophets. You can tackle oppression, you can stand up against dodgy business practices at work, you can risk being ostracized, you can say the hard things, because you know that popularity in this life is not what matters. That's not where you get your sense of self-worth from. You're not living for their applause: you're living for an audience of one.

Summing up

So as Jesus looks out across this great crowd, he's telling them and us that there are these two different kingdoms, two very different visions and sets of values for life. One thinks that you find blessing in riches and comfort and power and popularity. And it's about living for now. The problem is, Jesus says, that kind of blessing is just temporary, it will never fully satisfy and it's going to run out.

But there is another Kingdom, another way of living, where the values of the world are turned upside down, where your blessedness and feeling of wellbeing has nothing to do with your circumstances; where you can live and fight for what's right knowing that you're fighting on the right side, knowing that you're in the kingdom, knowing that this life isn't all there is. And that Kingdom is centered around Jesus; and its citizens would rather have Him than anything else on offer. Because He's the one who fully satisfies.

But here's the problem: how can you and I live this kind of upside down life? When the pull of money and comfort and power and popularity are so strong, how can we escape their gravitational pull and live like citizens of Jesus' kingdom?

The Kingdom and its Power

As Jesus preaches this sermon, he's surrounded by friends. He's surrounded by this great multitude, who think he's great. But it doesn't last. As Mark reminded us last week, among the disciples is Judas who will betray him, for what? For money. One of his own will choose riches over Jesus. And the crowd itself will turn upon Jesus. And Jesus himself will experience what it means to be hated and excluded and reviled and his name spurned as evil. But not for his sake, but for our sake. As Jesus went to the cross and gave His life there, he was hated that we might be loved; he was excluded that we might be included, he was reviled that we might know grace, his name was spurned so that ours might be written in the book of life.

You see, it's in the cross that we see what really matters in the Kingdom. It's in Jesus' resurrection from the dead that we see that this life and the temporary blessings of the world are not all there is, and it's in his ascension to heaven and the gift of the Holy Spirit indwelling us that we find the power to live it.

Through the cross, Jesus has thrown open the door to the Kingdom of God, to any who will put their trust in him and not in themselves, and who realize that its not riches or comfort or power or popularity that ultimately satisfy, it's Him.