

Sermon for Epiphany 6C

The Text: Luke 6:17-26

Perhaps you are familiar with the term ‘mountain top experiences’, referring to those times in our Christian faith when we have felt God’s presence and favour quite clearly. In these times it’s not unusual to experience an intense emotional high, as if we’re on top of the mountain, seemingly closer to God. It might have been the times when a scripture passage seemed to leap right out of the page at you and speak to your exact situation, or during worship where you felt an incredibly close connection with God, or an encounter with someone completely out of the blue who God used to bring help just when you needed it.

Then there are other times that feel just the opposite, when the euphoria of the mountain top experience has vanished and we might feel lonely and lost because God seems so distant and silent. We might wonder where God is and what he is doing and why he hasn’t answered us, and whether our suffering or struggles mean something is wrong with our faith.

A few verses before today’s text, Luke tells us that Jesus went up a mountainside to pray and choose the twelve Apostles. Now, today’s text begins with Jesus coming down with them. Luke points out that rather than ascending to the mountain peak, Jesus comes down with his apostles to stand on a level place to be with the multitudes that are there. This ‘level place’ isn’t specified—whether it is a level place in the hill country, or the side of the mountain, or a plain at the foot of it. But whatever it is, the multitude are not on the mountain top and Jesus is coming down to be with them; many of whom are ill and troubled by unclean spirits, and speak to them:

“Blessed are the poor, because yours is the Kingdom of God.

Blessed are those hungering now, because you will be satisfied. Blessed are those weeping now because you shall laugh.

Blessed are you when people hate you and reject you, and insult you, and cast out 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 that is how their fathers treated the prophets” (verses 20b-23).

This is the Good News of freedom for the captives that Jesus first proclaimed in the Synagogue at Nazareth from the Gospel reading a few

weeks ago. Luke tells us that Jesus is present among sinners; not only those from Israel but the Gentiles beyond, represented by the regions of Tyre and Sidon. He is among the crowds with their ill and diseased, and those troubled by unclean, or unholy, spirits; manifestations of death and the Kingdom of Darkness at work in the world. Jesus is there pronouncing blessing to those who look to him for the saving help they need, from the first words he says in our text: "Blessed are the poor because yours is the Kingdom of God."

Jesus doesn't simply mean all who are financially poor will be blessed and the wealthy won't be, since financial wealth—or lack of it—doesn't determine exclusion from and inclusion into God's kingdom.

Jesus is talking about our spiritual condition. To be poor in spirit is the natural condition of all humanity ever since Adam and Eve placed their own reason and will over what God had said in the Garden of Eden, making themselves to be their own authority. Since that day all of humanity in our natural state is captive to that same condition of 'my will be done.' We all fall to the temptations of the devil to follow the way of the world which says: "You are number one; you have the right to do whatever you want whenever you want to. You are the final authority, you decide what is moral and what isn't."

That sin manifests in so many ways. The world tells us that we should go, and do, and be—whatever it is that makes us feel fulfilled... *whatever*, even at the expense of others. The world tells us that the only irresponsibility is restraint.

This is the way of the rich; a picture of those who have turned to whatever it is apart from Christ that promises hope and fulfillment and identity and peace and satisfaction. They are those who imagine that they have all that they need and can do without God and his grace in Christ. They trust in themselves and are not sorry for their sin but laugh at it and revel in it. They set their hearts on earthly riches and fill their hearts with earthly riches. But these idols never satisfy in a lasting way. They enslave and entangle, for one has to work harder and harder at obtaining and maintaining them. So Jesus pronounces woe to them:

"Woe to you who are rich, because you already have in full what is due to you.

Woe to you who are satisfied now, because you will be hungry. Woe to those rejoicing now, because you will mourn and you will weep.

Woe when to you everyone speaks good of you, for that is what their fathers did to the false prophets" (verses 24-26)

The world doesn't understand that it is spiritually bankrupt—ironically, the very evidence that it is. No one can understand that they are poor in spirit

and unable to free ourselves from our sinful nature, or its wages of death, or the power of the kingdom of darkness. No one can know their only hope is to cling to nothing other than Christ and his cross unless they have *already* been blessed with faith, created by the Holy Spirit working through God's Word. Jesus says of these: "Theirs is the Kingdom of God".

Today's text is not about Jesus setting up conditions like being miserable, or going hungry, or selling everything we have to live on the streets so as to make God to take more notice of us. Jesus is saying that those who recognise themselves to be poor in spirit, who weep over sin, and who hunger and thirst for God and his gracious help have already been blessed by God because God has *already* gone to work in their hearts, leading them to not use his name in vain but to call on him for forgiveness, help, and thanksgiving, changing their heart to hunger for God's will and gladly feast on his word.

As frail and broken humanity lives in this self-destructing world, the mountain-top experiences are usually few and far between. Most of the time we live on the 'level places' and even in the valleys. Perhaps Luke didn't specify what the 'level place' was, so that the level place can be *our* level place where Jesus where Jesus still stands and blesses those who need his help.

It might be those times in our workplaces or sports clubs or among our families and friends when we were ridiculed for being Christians. It might be times when the physical or emotional frailty or illness we or a loved one suffers through saddens us, or perhaps it is the times our hearts are filled with grief, so badly hurt by others, even fellow Christians. Or perhaps it's grief over our own struggle with sin, so that with the Apostle Paul we lament: "I do not understand what I do. For what I want to do, I do not do, but what I hate, I do...For I have the desire to do what is good, but I cannot carry it out." (Romans 7:15-19). Perhaps it's the times we are all too aware of the devil's attacks on us, the condemnation from him we hear.

That is why God poured out the fullness of his riches in Christ on our bankrupt world. From the moment Jesus came into the world to be a down to earth God when he was born in a smelly and dirty stable in Bethlehem, surrounded by animals and their waste, he came to stand with us, not on the mountaintop, but on the level place; the plains, the wilderness, the valleys, and proclaim good news to us that frees us. It is not the mountain top experiences, not the feelings that will carry us through life, for they are too few and far between. It is Christ who will carry us through life when we are too weak to carry him. He says: "Yours

is the Kingdom of God". He doesn't say it will be, at some point in the future, but he promises that it *is* ours, now. For the Kingdom of God is not a place, but present in the person of Christ, and Christ is present and actively giving his grace and blessing whenever you gather around his word. Blessed are you who are poor in spirit, for yours *is* the Kingdom of God—it is not something we need to work towards or need mountain top experiences to verify—you *already have it!*

In Volume 21 of Luther's works (pp48-50), Luther says:

"For I hear my Lord Christ telling me that he is truly delighted, and commanding me to be happy about it...This is not a Christian calling me "blessed," nor even an angel, but the Lord of all the angels, before whom they and all the creatures must kneel and adore."

It was when we were poor in spirit, that our Heavenly Father opened the storehouse of heaven and poured his riches into the world through his only Son, who shed his own blood on the Cross to ransom the world, a gift more precious than any earthly sum. There Christ became poor for our sakes, and took the fullness of human sin and brokenness upon himself. There on the Cross he suffered hate and exclusion. He was ridiculed and suffered the most brutal persecution. He was abandoned, so that we would never be abandoned by God.

It was in our baptism that God brought the Cross to us, washing away *our* sins and joining us to Jesus' own death and resurrection, giving us his own righteousness and purity. He put his own name on us—the Father, Son and Holy Spirit—so that we would belong to him as his treasured possession forever. Even if we are insulted or persecuted for bearing God's name, Jesus assures us that we belong in the Kingdom of Heaven and the devil himself cannot take that away from us.

Through faith we are Christ's and he is ours, and all his grace and blessings are our inheritance. No matter what we face, God will never abandon us, but face it with us. And he will comfort us and bring us peace through his precious gospel as he stands on the level place with us. For through faith in Jesus, ours is the Kingdom of God, and our reward is great in heaven! Amen.