

Sixth Sunday after Epiphany

17.02.2019
By Pat Bennett

Introduction

The gospel texts for the next two weeks draw on one of the most well known – and perhaps, in places, most controversial – passages in Luke's Gospel. The mixture of blessings and woes in today's reading can make for uncomfortable hearing and there are many questions about how precisely some of them are to be understood. However our reflection will consider what lies behind them in a more general way, and where this in turn might point us in the context of our exploration of a spirituality of conflict.

Preparation

Imagine Jesus delivering this address here and now in our society. What things do you think would feature in the blessings and woes?

Text

Luke 6:17–26

He came down with them and stood on a level place, with a great crowd of his disciples and a great multitude of people from all Judea, Jerusalem, and the coast of Tyre and Sidon.

They had come to hear him and to be healed of their diseases; and those who were troubled with unclean spirits were cured.

And all in the crowd were trying to touch him, for power came out from him and healed all of them.

Then he looked up at his disciples and said: "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.

“Blessed are you when people hate you, and when they exclude you, revile you, and defame you on account of the Son of Man.

Rejoice in that day and leap for joy, for surely your reward is great in heaven; for that is what their ancestors did to the prophets.

“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.

Comment

Before we begin to consider the passage, it's helpful to remind ourselves of what has preceded it. Immediately prior to the events Luke describes, Jesus has spent the night in prayer up on a mountain, following which he has selected 12 men from amongst a much larger group (see v.17) of disciples (*mathētēs – learners/pupils*) to fulfil a much more specific role as his apostles (*apostolos – messenger/ambassador/delegate*). As the whole group then descends, they encounter a 'great multitude' who have travelled from far and wide to see or hear Jesus.

As is so often the case in the Gospel stories, Jesus attends first to their immediate physical needs – in this case healing diseases and casting out 'unclean spirits', all the while allowing people to touch him as part of these processes – it must have exhausting work. However, rather than then seeking to get away to rest and recharge, Jesus embarks on a restatement of his manifesto – or rather, the manifesto of the Kingdom of Heaven – which he set out in the synagogue at the start of his public ministry

This iteration begins with four blessings followed immediately by four woes. It is important to note that the woes do not equate to curses – *ouai* is an exclamation of grief (something akin to 'alas!') – so this is Jesus grieving over those who will make choices which lead them away from the Kingdom. Interestingly though, the text indicates that these opening blessings and woes are directed not towards the crowd at large (Jesus' speech will later widen to include them) but rather at his disciples – some of whom at least have been in the group with him on the previous day from amongst which the twelve apostles had been chosen.

It is as if Jesus is drawing a picture specifically for those who have already been following him with a certain degree of application and attention (and who have therefore presumably heard his discussions of the nature of the Kingdom on more than one occasion): the kingdom is already there for them to enter (the first blessing is couched in the current tense) – but working for its establishment will make physical and emotional demands on them, as indeed they have just witnessed in the instance of Jesus himself, and they will have to bear these, at least for the present (the subsequent blessings are couched in a future tense). Furthermore such a course of action will inevitably bring them conflict and trouble – as will become ever more evident as they continue to journey with Jesus towards Jerusalem. Perhaps Jesus already senses or knows that for some of them, the ask will be too great and they will instead settle for a form of religious observance whose benefits are more immediate but less enduring (for a further discussion of this and the meaning of *apech* see the reflection for Ash Wednesday in Year B) and moreover that they will come to recognise and regret this.

This set of dynamics and choices applies to any endeavour connected with the building of the Kingdom of God – the realm founded on love and rooted in justice and peace where all can flourish as God intended. Thus we can also bring this as a lens to bear on conflict situations in which we might be involved – whatever their scale or location.

Response

How might the dynamics and issues which Jesus points towards in his address to the disciples look in the context of work to understand and resolve conflict situations?

If you then think about a particular conflict issue you are (or have recently been) involved in, how do you see them being specifically manifest in this?

Are there steps you could take (or things you might do differently in future) which might help you to deal with these or to make use of them to help you stay with the task?

Prayer

Jesus
You knew the cost of building God's Kingdom
in every fibre of your being,
and were willing to pay it
for the joy that was to come.

Help us to be constant, as you were constant,
even when the work is wearying
and the way hard;
that we too
in time,
and beyond time,
may know for ourselves
and witness in others
the joyful flourishing
which is your Kingdom's hallmark.

Amen
