

Luke 6:17-26

Jeremiah 17:5-10; 1 Corinthians 15:12-20

I'm sure that we would all like to live lives that are comfortable, that are satisfying, that are happy, and in which we are popular. This is indeed our natural desire as human beings. Now at the present time we might be feeling comfortable, satisfied and happy, and we might feel that we're popular, or on the other hand, we might not be experiencing these things at all - we might actually be going through a somewhat more trying time. But whatever our current state of affairs, the well-known words of Our Lord - the Blessings and the Woes - pose a profound challenge to each one of us who are sincerely seeking to follow Christ.

Now over the centuries, these words of Jesus have been a source of inspiration for various political movements, as people have seen in the Lord's words a challenge to the many social and economic injustices in the world. Hence those who are poor, those who are without food, those who are

sorrowful now, and those who are marginalised for whatever reason, will find justice and fulfilment in God's Kingdom. And there's certainly some legitimacy in interpreting the passage in this kind of way, and especially in applying it to the struggle against oppression in its various forms. Yet at the same time, it has to be said that this isn't the *primary* intention of Christ's teaching here. For if we look at the context of the passage, we notice that this is, in fact, teaching directed specifically to Christ's *disciples* - "Then Jesus looked up at his *disciples* and said....." - this isn't general advice for everyone, but is intended specifically for those, then and now, who are seeking to follow in *his* way.

And the key emphasis of the Lord's words here is upon the need for us to keep constantly focused upon things *eternal*. It might be nice to simply lie back and be content with all the nice things in life, but Jesus challenges us here to look beyond these earthly things to that which lasts forever. And that eternal perspective is not simply based on wishful thinking. Rather, as our reading from Paul's First

Letter to the Corinthians reminds us, the hope we have is grounded in the historical reality of the resurrection of the Lord Jesus Christ from the dead; just as he was raised, so those who put their trust in him will one day be raised in the same way.

Now you don't need me to remind you that keeping hold of the *eternal* perspective is certainly *not* easy, living as we do in our relatively comfortable 21st century western society - a society which lays great emphasis upon living for the moment - seeking as much pleasure and enjoyment as we can *now* - *immediately*. And there is indeed so much pressure upon us, as those who seek to follow Christ, to conform to the prevailing culture. So, we need to be constantly reminded of the fact that as Christian believers, we are called to live here on earth as citizens of heaven - as we go about our daily business, seeking always to hold on to that which lasts forever - "for surely your reward is great in heaven", the Lord Jesus declares to us. Indeed, our awareness of that which is eternal puts all earthly things into proper perspective.

So, the Blessings and the Woes touch upon the four marks of Christian discipleship - what it really means for us to live our lives in the light of eternity - to live according to *God's* agenda. Now each of the Blessings and Woes are coupled together in pairs.

So the first mark of Christian discipleship is poverty: "Blessed are you who are *poor*, for yours is the Kingdom of God.....But woe to you who are rich, for you have received your consolation." Now what does Jesus mean by 'poor'? It could be seen as a reference to those who are economically poor, but I don't think it's *essentially* about those who are poor in monetary terms. After all, when we look through the Gospels, we find that Jesus ministered both to those who are materially poor (like beggars at the roadside) as well as those who were well-off from an economic point of view (like tax collectors) - Christ welcomed into his Kingdom *all* who turned to him.

No, what this is *primarily* about is *poverty in spirit*; the equivalent passage in Matthew's Gospel makes

this clear - “Blessed are the poor *in spirit*”. Because Christians are those who recognise their spiritual poverty, and thus their constant need to put their trust in the Lord. That’s not to say, of course, that our willingness or not to put our whole trust in him isn’t in some way related to our material wealth. Our earthly possessions and money can so easily get in the way of our relationship with the Lord, if we allow ourselves to get possessed by them. Placing our trust in that which is temporal, seeking solace in these earthly things, seriously distracts us from that which is eternal, namely our relationship with the living God. So, may we constantly acknowledge our need for the Lord - our dependence upon *him* alone.

The second mark of Christian discipleship is hunger - “Blessed are you who are *hungry* now, for you will be filled.....[but] Woe to you who are full now, for you will be hungry.” It’s about having a real hunger for more of Jesus in our lives - a constant desire to know him and to love him more, and to become more like him day by day. The prevailing philosophy of today’s society is that we should seek fulfillment

in worldly pleasures - nice food, nice designer clothing, a nice collection of cars on the driveway, and so on. It’s what the ‘pursuit of happiness’ of the American dream is all about. But the reality is that these things can never satisfy - and sometimes they even cause more sorrow and heartache. As is often pointed out, we can only drive one car at a time, we can only wear one set of clothing at a time, etc. Despite all our material pleasures, a deep hunger still remains in our souls - a hunger that only *God* can truly satisfy. And Christians are those who realise and acknowledge this truth - for *we* know that what this world offers can *never* fully satisfy us. It should be our desire, above all else, to know and to love God more and more.

What’s more, as Christians, there should be a deep hunger within us to be more *like* Jesus - a real desire to grow in Christ-likeness - to increasingly display forth in our lives the Fruit of the Spirit - to be more loving, joyous and peaceful, to be more patient, kind and generous, and to be more faithful, to be more gentle and to show more self-control. Various pop

stars, film and TV personalities, glamour models, and so on, often serve as role models for people today. But as Christian believers, *Christ* should be *our* role model. And through the power of the Holy Spirit working in and through us, we can indeed become more like *him*.

The third mark of Christian discipleship is tears - "Blessed are you who *weep* now, for you will laugh.....[but] Woe to you who are laughing now, for you will mourn and weep." Christians are those who weep. We mourn the evil that we see all around us in the world. And at the same time, we ourselves realise that *we* are part of the problem. We are people who recognise and acknowledge the reality of our *own* sinfulness. When we share together in Holy Communion, it's not simply about recounting events from way back in the past, but rather we - each one of us - are entering into that history of sin and salvation - we are acknowledging that we ourselves are sinful and are in need of the redemption which Christ offers us through his death on the Cross two thousand years ago.

As Christians, too, we are people who long for a world free of evil. In a recent interview, the ex-Beatle, Ringo Starr, says this:

...I wish the whole world was living in peace and love. But, as we all know, it isn't. But, you know, my part in it is I just go, 'peace and love,' and if anybody does it with me, for that second, two people have thought, 'peace and love.' So it sort of goes out like the pebble in the ocean, you know? The ripples go out and out and out. 'Peace and love.' You can't beat that.

It all sounds so wonderful - straight out of the teaching of the late Maharishi Mahesh Yogi. *Except* that it fails to take into account one crucial factor - namely *sin*. In stark contrast, the peace *we* long for is *not* that vague, superficial kind of peace which ageing 60s pop icons hope for but can never achieve, but rather *we* long for God's *real* and *lasting* peace - that peace that will reign when his Kingdom is fully established. As believers, we know that there is indeed a better future to what we have in the here and now. It's a truth which Christians around the world today who are persecuted for the Faith hold onto very firmly - because it's in holding fast to God's

eternal promises that they are able to endure their present trials. And so too with each one of *us*, constantly grasping hold of the *eternal* picture profoundly impacts upon our attitude to life in the here and now.

And the fourth mark of Christian discipleship is rejection - “Blessed are you when people *hate* you, and when they *exclude* you, *revile* you, and *defame* you on account of the Son of Man.....for surely your reward is great in heaven.....[but] Woe to you when all speak well of you, for that is what their ancestors did to the false prophets.” In facing rejection as Christians, we are very much following in the footsteps of Our Lord Jesus, for he himself was despised and rejected for speaking God’s truth and doing God’s works. If we are sincerely seeking to follow in the way of Christ, then *we* can expect to suffer rejection - maybe at our places of work, amongst our neighbours, or even within our families - and it’s all because we seek to stand up for God’s truth and to live our lives in the light of the Gospel.

How crucial it is that we, as Christian believers, hold fast to God’s truth – respectfully and graciously - even if that might make us unpopular. For it should be *our* desire to seek the approval of the Lord alone in all that we say and do, rather than the approval of the world. In seeking to do the will of God, we will inevitably find ourselves coming into conflict with certain attitudes prevalent in our contemporary culture. There is a constant temptation for the Church to compromise God’s truth in certain ways, in order to become more popular in the eyes of wider society. But we must resist this. For we are a people called to be different and this means that we will face rejection on account of the Son of Man - because our allegiance must always be first and foremost to *him*.

So, what we have in the ‘Blessings and Woes’ is a remarkable reversal of values which will be seen in God’s people. For *God’s* people will prize, above all else, those things that the world regards as pitiable, and they will be suspicious of those things that the world sees as desirable. The values taken for granted

by the world are questioned by God's people and are re-evaluated by them in the light of God's truth - in the light of eternity.

So, the key challenge for *us* is to look beyond the here and now - looking constantly to the bigger picture - seeking fulfilment in that which lasts forever. The decision is ours. As the Old Testament reading from the prophecy of Jeremiah reminds us, the Lord will judge the hearts and minds of every individual according to their ways and fruitfulness – whether they have remained steadfast, trusting in Him. For it is in this that true happiness – true blessedness – is to be found. Suffice it to say that the Lord's four Woes provide a stark warning to those who would seek their fulfilment simply in earthly things.

Let us pray: Grant us, Lord, not to be anxious about earthly things, but to love things heavenly; and even now, while we are placed among things that are passing away, to hold fast to those things which last forever; through Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.