

Epiphany 6 year C 2022

Please be seated.

Are you sitting comfortably?

You are?

Then clearly you weren't listening when I read the *Gospel*, because the *Gospel* makes very uncomfortable reading - at least, it does to me.

Woe to you who are rich.

Woe to you who are full now.

Woe to you who are laughing now.

Woe to you when all speak well of you.

In global terms, we are all rich, some of us very rich. I can't imagine that any of us will go hungry today (although in the past I have been there - it isn't pleasant). I am happy in my new home and although I don't really know what people say about me, if I said I didn't care, you would know that I was lying. So, woe is me! It's hard to swallow, isn't it? Because we all want to be materially and socially secure - it is part of our culture and our human nature. So what are we to make of these 'woes', these maledictions?

And indeed, what are we to make of the benedictions, the other side of the coin of Jesus' teaching.

Being poor, hungry, grieving and reviled doesn't sound much of a blessing, does it? Jesus is talking to his disciples - whether just the twelve, whom he has just chosen, or to a large crowd of them isn't clear. They, if they stay true to him, will be poor, they will go hungry, they will grieve for many things they meet on their journey - the pain and sickness of many, the hard heartedness of those who feel superior, and especially they will grieve for the fate of their leader and his horrific death, and they will certainly be reviled by the Jewish authorities and many of their fellow countrymen. That is what discipleship will cost them.

Those who are rich, well-fed, live happy lives and are well-thought of, that is, those who cause poverty and hunger, pain and rejection in society, are warned of what is to come, for surely this is a teaching about the future, not the present - a teaching about the kingdom to come, the one that Jesus is inaugurating - God's kingdom; if you are hungry NOW you will be filled THEN; if you weep NOW, you will laugh, THEN - when the kingdom comes. In the synagogue in Nazareth, Jesus had read from the prophecy of Isaiah -

'He has anointed me to bring good news to the poor. He has sent me to proclaim release to the captives and recovery of sight to the blind, to let the oppressed go free, to proclaim the year of the Lord's favour.'

The proclamation has begun, but the cost of proclaiming the year of the Lord's favour will be high. Is it too high, too high for us? Luke is not setting before us a list of does and don'ts - especially don'ts - don't be happy, don't eat sufficient, don't keep enough for your own needs - that would be ridiculous. We want to lift people out of poverty and hunger, not join their ranks. The idolatry comes in thinking that wealth, comfort, approbation are the only things that matter, and that NOW is the only time that matters.

Someone said to me last week, 'we know what has happened in the past, we know what is happening in the present but we cannot know what will happen in the future'. Jesus is telling us something different - we can see the future and we need to live now as if it is then, kingdom time. As Paul writes to the Corinthians 'if for this life only we have hoped in Christ, we are of all people most to be pitied'.

I said last week that when it came to school sports, nobody wanted me on their team. Jesus has just selected his team - immediately before this teaching, after a night of prayer, he has chosen the twelve - now he looks them in the eye and says - 'there's just one thing I forgot to tell you - all the rules have changed. Here are the new rules - in summary form. These are the rules you must remember, especially when the going gets tough. Forget what the Pharisees have taught you, forget what the Sadducees have taught you, forget about the scribes - even forget what your parents have told you - these are the new rules - except they are really very old rules. You will find them in the Book Deuteronomy, in the covenant made by God and Israel when they came out of Egypt, the covenant of the Exodus - God's rules.'

The people have turned God's world upside down and we are going to turn it back up the right way, the way God intended.

Four blessings, four warnings. Good news for all those who haven't had good news for a long time. It will provoke opposition from those who like things the way they are. Jesus' promise of blessing and warning rings with echoes of the prophets of old -

and he know that the reaction of many will be the same in his day as in the past.

Jesus is still calling people to be on his team and to take part in the great adventure of turning the world upside down, or should that be the right way up? On this team some of us might be called to be goalkeepers, protecting us from the assaults of the enemy through prayer and teaching and preaching. Some might be called to be goal scorers, advancing the possibility of success through mission and ministry; those on the left wing could be undertaking social action, whilst those on the right might be nurturing the young, encouraging the faint hearted, supporting the elderly - and then, of course, there is the much needed back-room staff - buildings, finance, grounds, committees, etc. It all needs doing - all of us like trees planted by streams of water yielding our fruit in due season, not dried up shrubs on waste land, living today as if today is God's tomorrow.