

Colossians 3: 1 -11

The New Life in Christ

So if you have been raised with Christ, seek the things that are above, where Christ is, seated at the right hand of God. Set your minds on things that are above, not on things that are on earth, for you have died, and your life is hidden with Christ in God. When Christ who is your life is revealed, then you also will be revealed with him in glory.

Put to death, therefore, whatever in you is earthly: fornication, impurity, passion, evil desire, and greed (which is idolatry). On account of these the wrath of God is coming on those who are disobedient. These are the ways you also once followed, when you were living that life. But now you must get rid of all such things—anger, wrath, malice, slander, and abusive language from your mouth. Do not lie to one another, seeing that you have stripped off the old self with its practices and have clothed yourselves with the new self, which is being renewed in knowledge according to the image of its creator. In that renewal there is no longer Greek and Jew, circumcised and uncircumcised, barbarian, Scythian, slave and free; but Christ is all and in all!

Luke 6: 20 -26

Blessings and Woes

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 on 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.*

'Woe to you when all speak well of you, for that is what their ancestors did to the false prophets.

Blessed are you who are poor.

I wonder what you remember as you look back to your childhood? I grew up during the 2nd World War, as perhaps some you did, when much of our food was rationed – including sweets, which remained on the ration long after the war was over. I can remember clothing coupons which had to be saved up in order to buy something special, and, compared to today's society we would certainly be considered to be poor.

When Jesus says, *Blessed are you who are poor*, he is talking to the disciples, brand new disciples whom he has chosen from the crowd following him after a night spent in prayer upon the mountain. In the verses immediately before those we have just heard Luke names them. Those disciples, gathered together by their rabbi, their teacher, as was the custom among the Jewish people in those days, were giving up everything to follow their master – home, family, job, means of survival, everything was being cast aside as each of them embraced a new life with Jesus. In materialistic terms they had nothing, but in fact they had everything. For three years they would know his physical presence as he patiently taught them, trained them for the life they would continue when his earthly life was over, confident that he would be with them always, because he told them so.

The teaching of Jesus was usually radical, and this is no exception. He turns accepted wisdom on its head and challenges those who are listening, in this case his new disciples. To be poor, to be hungry, to weep doesn't sound like the best of invitations, but it is in that position that it is easier to take a risk, step out in faith, because you have nothing to lose!

On the other hand, those who are rich view matters from a different perspective. Remember the rich man who came to Jesus asking what he needed to do to inherit eternal life? 'Sell everything you have,' Jesus told him, 'and come and follow me,' those last words the same as the ones he had spoken to his disciples. But the rich man did not accept Jesus' invitation. We're told that he went away sorrowful, 'because he had many possessions.' It was easier for the twelve to give up everything, because they had little; the rich man was weighed down by his possessions – not an advantage but a burden.

Woe to you who are rich.

And what about those who weep? There is no one who can say that they have never wept, never known sorrow or grief. But in time the laughter comes back into our lives, sometimes even in the midst of the sorrow, as I have observed at funerals when a member of the family, giving a tribute highlights the foibles and idiosyncrasies of the person they are honouring, and those who have known them so well find themselves smiling and even laughing as they remember.

There is no joy without sorrow, no laughter without tears. We all experience both, and better the tears first to be overcome by the laughter than the other way round.

Woe to you when all speak well of you.

It is so tempting to believe all the kind words which people say to us.

Nice service, Vicar. Those words were often uttered when one or other of the clergy stood at the door as people went out, in pre-Covid times, but I wonder what was actually meant. It was sometimes just a way of saying 'Goodbye', a greeting, nothing more. If any of us were to believe that we

had actually made a difference to a person's life each time we heard those words, we would certainly be deceiving ourselves. Just as all of us utter encouraging words from time to time to bolster up someone's confidence – not being insincere, exactly, but maybe not saying the whole truth, so it's advisable not to take great store by what is said to us. If everyone speaks well of us, whether we be clergy, teachers or politicians, we're not doing our job properly! Criticism hones and polishes, too much praise makes someone complacent.

And so looking at these words of Jesus, these Beatitudes, as they are known because of the repetition of the word 'blessed', we can see that he is not advocating a life full of unremitting harshness, in order to receive our reward in heaven. Rather he is saying that we need to experience both sides of the coin, the good and the bad, and better to endure the more difficult aspects of life first, to fully appreciate the joy which comes later, than to have it the other way round.

More importantly, he is calling on his disciples – both then and now – to sit lightly to possessions and the good things of life and be willing to surrender everything, even life itself for his sake. For of such is the Kingdom of heaven.

Amen

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