Sermon 3rd Sunday before Lent

Sunday 13th February 2022 by the Rev’d Graham Earney

1 Corinthians 15:12-20

Luke 6:17-26

At this time of year, the Christian story moves on with such a pace. We have moved through all of the post-Christmas and Epiphany seasons. We now turn our faces resolutely towards Lent, Holy Week and Easter. This is the 3rd Sunday before the beginning of Lent, what in the old calendar was called Septuagesima.

Our gospel reading included Luke’s version of the Beatitudes and the beginning of his ‘sermon on the mount’. We use that term because the somewhat longer version in Matthew is delivered up a mountain. Matthew and Luke are the only gospels to cover both Beatitudes and the ‘sermon’. We know that both evangelists used the format from Mark’s gospel as the shape of their gospels. Into that framework they incorporated stories they collected separately. They also appear to use a common source, referred to by scholars as Q, which was subsequently lost. The Beatitudes are assumed to have come from this source – such is the similarity of the two accounts. Although that in Matthew is both longer and more involved. Neither Mark or John have equivalent passages.

However, the two accounts are different in setting and tone. Matthew’s does indeed happen up a mountain – hence the title ‘Sermon on the Mount’. It is quite formal. It is also aspirational, in the sense of taking people up towards God. There is a sense of ‘this is what it will be like in the future’.

The setting for Luke’s version, which has been called by some, ‘The Inaugural Sermon of the New Israel’, is very different. True Jesus has been up the mountain to pray in solitude before calling his disciples. Together with them he comes to flat land, which is big enough for the people to come out to hear his teaching. He is not above the people, he is among the people. There is something symbolic here. This is about the kingdom of God being with the people in the present. This is about Jesus having already broken down the barrier between the human world and God’s realm. This is about Jesus having brought God’s reign into the lives of ordinary people just as Jesus has chosen ordinary people to be his disciples.

The difference in ‘tone’ is less easy to explain. To some degree it is a matter of subjective judgement. To me, the Lukan account has always seemed more ‘homely’ – more down to earth and about the daily lives the people led. Matthew’s account is more structured and formal. It is also about how the people should behave if they are to attain God’s future promise. It has an ethical overtone – this is what you should aspire to if you are to attain the prize. Luke’s account appears not to have this ethical overtone. It is much more a factual description of how people live. There is no false benefit of being poor. It is about lives being changed by having met Jesus and come in contact with the kingdom of God in the present.

The shape of the Beatitudes in Luke is quite simple. There are four beatitudes in two pairs – about poverty and hunger and tears and suffering.

*Blessed are you who are poor*

*Blessed are you who are hungry now*

*Blessed are you who weep now*

*Blessed are you when people hate you*

These are followed by four ‘woes’. These are not condemnatory as they might have been in the context of the tone of Matthew’s version. The Greek word used would not equate to how we would use ‘woe’ today. It would be better translated with a note of regret – ‘alas’ or ‘beware’ would be nearer the mark.

*Woe to you who would be rich*

*Woe to you who are full now*

*Woe to you who are laughing now*

*Woe to you when all speak well of you*

As you can see, each is the opposite of the corresponding blessing.

In essence, Jesus is talking to the people about intention and expectation. It is about who they are in the present. It is about their direction of travel. Are they, despite their present circumstances seeking the generosity of God and his kingdom? Are they living their lives for themselves or for others? Are they out for what they can get at the moment or are they prepared to forgo present pleasures for the sake of serving God in the present and in eternity?

Those are questions from the very beginning of the ministry and mission of Jesus. They are questions which have stayed with the Church through countless generations – although we must be honest and say “not always with the prominence they deserve”. They are still the questions for us nearly two millennia later.

What is our intention, as individuals and as Church, as the world learns to cope with the aftermath of the pandemic? What is our direction of travel as we seek to serve God as we respond to and serve the needs of our neighbours?  There is much that we do already, but there is also so much more to be done.

We support the food bank – but the need for food banks increases daily, and will continue to grow while fuel and food price rises squeeze household budgets. Homelessness and mental health issues mean that Shrewsbury Ark, Crisis, and Church Homelessness Trust have greater burdens placed on their resources. Changes in climate and the weather patterns affected by it place greater stress on Christian Aid and similar aid agencies working across the globe. It is good that Lent Lunches are returning this year to support some of these charities.

Alongside our support for such organisations, is there more we can be doing at local level. Do we need to find out more about the requirements of our local communities? So that we can respond as both individuals and as Church. I know we are getting on a bit – perhaps a lot in the case of some of us – but if we proved to be of use to the neighbourhood perhaps others would join with us to make a difference.

St Paul spoke to the Corinthian Christians of the resurrection of Jesus being attested to by the faith of those who believe. Let us attest to the reality of the kingdom which became apparent in the ministry of Jesus. Let us live the gospel today so that God’s generosity of spirit and love are seen in the way in which we help practically those around us.

Rev’d Graham Earney