

Blessed are you poor

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High Street Uniting Church Frankston

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Read: Luke 6:17-26

Loving God, we seek your blessing, not your confronting; so grant us grace as we reflect on Jesus' sermon on the Plain, and let us hear your love. Amen.

Some of you might remember how just before Christmas we started the journey into Bible readings from the gospel of Luke with the angel announcing the coming births of both John the Baptist and Jesus. In that context, the male priest, Zechariah, is silenced; and the young woman, Mary, sings an astounding song about what God was doing – bringing down the powerful and lifting up the lowly; filling the hungry with good things and sending the rich away empty; and remembering mercy for God's servant Israel.

From the very first chapter in Luke it is clear that God is in the business of turning our regular power structures upside down. Jesus is coming as a great leveller.

We have since recently heard Jesus' first quoted sermon in the synagogue in Nazareth, where he quotes from Isaiah that the Spirit is upon him to bring good news to the poor, recovery of sight to the blind, and freedom for the captive and oppressed. And the people there in the synagogue spoke well of him and of his words, at first, until he dropped some comments pointing out God's particular care for foreigners and outsiders.

After that, Luke describes Jesus going about teaching and healing. A lot of people start following him and even committing to him as disciples. From among the disciples Jesus picks twelve to be called the apostles, the 'sent-ones'.

He did that naming of the apostles on the mountain where he had gone to pray, and then he comes down with them to the level place, which is where today's reading is set. Jesus comes and stands very much among the group of disciples and the great multitudes who have come to hear him and to be healed.

It's important to recognise the groups who are all on the level plain there: the 12 he's just chosen, the group of disciples who are serious about following him, and all who have come with their interest and their needs. And as he begins to speak he raises his eyes to look up at his disciples – and he sees them, he sees their expectations and hopes and needs – and he addresses them.

That setting is worth picturing.

This week I spent some time with Esther in the office working through some of the various groups who come here to use these facilities - who use or hire the halls. As we looked at the hiring arrangements it became clear that we could classify some as essential support groups. Where they are not directly initiatives of the congregation, they are charged a very low rental amount. That includes several AA groups, Gamblers Anonymous, and other similar support groups.

Besides them, there are some other not-for-profit groups which don't quite classify as essential support groups. For them, a slightly bigger (but still small) amount of rent is charged. And then there are a few other groups who are good for the community, who pay a little bit more.

I think it's worth thinking about all of those groups in the context of this reading. I'm not suggesting that these groups are with us in order for us to treat them as a mission field, or that their hall hire necessarily means that they have a meaningful relationship with the congregation or with God in any particular way. But, thinking about these groups who come here with their own issues and focuses might help us in listening to today's Bible reading for Frankston.

I think it's helpful to have those groups and those people in mind in order to picture this scene. If only as a starting place. Because we can picture the scene like this...

Jesus comes down to a level place in Frankston – well, we're on the hill, but perhaps we could imagine that we are on the flat, a bit lower. But he comes to address first, his disciples (and not just the 12 leaders) - his disciples – that's us - but in the presence of all those who've come from the wider community with their various stories and needs. Have this in your imagination. Because in the context of the people around Jesus addresses his disciples....

and he says, "Blessed are you, who are poor"

Some of Jesus' disciples have left everything to follow him. That's what we heard about Simon Peter last week. The same was true for Levi, the tax-collector. Levi was wealthy enough to throw a banquet for Jesus, but we're told he left everything to follow him. And presumably some of Jesus' disciples didn't have much to start with.

To his disciples who are poor Jesus says "you are blessed, because the kingdom of heaven belongs to you" – you are part of God's kingdom; you have it to share.

Despite the efforts of various televangelists and others, Jesus doesn't get confused about whether riches are a sign of blessing or favour, or of being valued. Imagine if we thought our value was proven by our lovely building here? Or maybe our value measured by the back hall which is in much poorer condition with stuck old windows and an asbestos roof and for which the tiny amount rent we earn from it is never going to turn it around. Or maybe our value is in neither of those.

Maybe the most important thing here is to recognise our context among those gathered around us in our imagination as Jesus looks past us to the community gathered around to say “blessed are you poor”. And maybe some of that blessing comes through our giving, through our sharing, as people, in community.

When Jesus addresses his disciples it isn't even in a church – it's on the plain. So even if you're online listening to this the message is the same. It doesn't depend on this building.

But hold in your imagination the community around us as we stand on the plain with Jesus and he addresses us as disciples and says “blessed are you who are poor”. Because even in our poverty – are we poor? – we have the kingdom to share. And those who leave everything to follow Jesus have the kingdom to share in abundance.

And Jesus sees our generosity, and is next to us in it.

And Jesus sees our weeping, and weeps alongside us.

And Jesus sees the hungry, and promises that they'll be filled.

We are seen.

We learn from Jesus.

And we are loved.

In the name of God.