

Luke 6:17-26

Hugh Latimer once preached before King Henry VIII. Henry was greatly displeased by the boldness in the sermon and ordered Latimer to preach again on the following Sunday and apologise for the offence he had given. The next Sunday, after reading his text, he thus began his sermon: "Hugh Latimer, dost thou know before whom thou are this day to speak? To the high and mighty monarch, the king's most excellent majesty, who can take away thy life, if thou offendest. Therefore, take heed that thou speakest not a word that may displease. But then consider well, Hugh, dost thou not know from whence thou comest--upon Whose message thou are sent? Even by the great and mighty God, Who is all-present and Who beholdeth all thy ways and Who is able to cast thy soul into hell! Therefore, take care that thou

deliverest thy message faithfully." He then preached the same sermon he had preached the preceding Sunday-- and with considerably more energy.¹

You will no doubt be aware that there is a well-known text in Matthew's Gospel which has become known as 'the Sermon on the Mount'. Here we have Luke's version known as 'the Sermon on the Plain'. It is a good deal briefer than Matthew's. It contains similar blessings and curses but there are differences and the differences must be significant. Matthew wrote 'the poor in spirit', Luke simply 'the poor'. Matthew wrote 'those who hunger for righteousness' whilst Luke simply wrote 'the hungry'. It is no surprise that the Church through the years has favoured Matthew's apparent spiritualising of the truth to the alarming physical

¹ Cocoris, M. 1984 *Evangelism, A Biblical Approach* Moody: Chicago p. 126

reality of Luke's version. The Sermon on the Mount is more often referred to than the Sermon on the Plain. Yet it is the unflinching directness of the Sermon on the Plain that carries its power and its relevance. This was not delivered from the remoteness of the mountaintop. It came from the one standing in the midst of the people, speaking plainly so that no-one would misunderstand. I think it is fair to assume that Matthew and Luke were referring to one remarkable gathering in Jesus' ministry and not two. We have different views on the same event before us. So the differences in the accounts are significant and a closer look should reward us with a lead today.

It's clear from both accounts that Jesus was primarily addressing the disciples. The sermon was not directed in the first instance to wider society although of course and who had ears to hear could respond. But it is

those who have been already impacted by Jesus - the called and the healed - who are the audience. So the audience is the same, so that does not explain the differences between the accounts. We're looking for something else and what we're looking for is perspective. Why are the two accounts different? - because the perspective before Jesus is different in both narratives. There's a telling clue which emerges from Luke's account when the two versions are further compared. Matthew recorded that Jesus simply opened his mouth and began to teach the disciples. Here was a pronouncement from above being brought to the people in much the same way as Moses years before would have ascended Mount Sinai and returned with the tablets of God's law; from above. But Luke stated that Jesus focussed his eyes on the disciples. The unclean spirits that he had recently exorcised had revealed his identity

as the Son of God. The population were unable to see what the demons could see. Here Jesus, on the same level as the disciples, looks out upon them and sees them with the eyes of God. These blessings and curses were to be delivered to people who were transparent to God and who desperately needed to begin to live in the reality of the teaching of Christ *now*.

You see, if the Sermon on the Mount can be interpreted as forward looking, describing an ideal scenario that will emerge in the future, then the reader of Luke's Sermon on the Plain cannot get away with that kind of deferred interpretation. Jesus was describing things the way they were and the implications of the state people find themselves in are to be experienced now, or in the near future. The reference to heaven in verse 23 should not push our interpretation forward into the 'not yet',

because the reward in heaven is in the present tense. It is for now.

Jesus was declaring that the kingdom of God, the realm of God's rule, are for those who ultimately have nothing to lean on apart from God. The curses were directed at those who had plenty of other things in which they could place their trust and they did so. So if you were a disciple of Jesus receiving the sermon at its delivery how would you be expected to respond, especially if you had some security in this life? Luke was not biased against the wealthy. He told favourable stories about rich people: Zacchaeus, Joseph Barnabas, Cornelius and Lydia. It was what these rich people did with their wealth in response to Jesus that mattered. For us, we must take very seriously the call to live simply.

The concert impresario, Sol Hurok, liked to say that Marian Anderson, the great American contralto, and one

of the first black classical American singers, hadn't simply grown great, she'd grown great simply. He says: "A few years ago a reporter interviewed Marian and asked her to name the greatest moment in her life. I was in her dressing room at the time and was curious to hear the answer. I knew she had many big moments to choose from. There was the night Toscanini told her that hers was the finest voice of the century. There was the private concert she gave at the White House for the Roosevelts and the King and Queen of England. She had received the \$10,000 Bok Award as the person who had done the most for her home town, Philadelphia. To top it all, there was that Easter Sunday in Washington when she stood beneath the Lincoln statue and sang for a crowd of 75,000, which included Cabinet members, Supreme Court Justices, and most members of Congress. Which of those big moments did she choose? "None of

them," said Hurok. "Miss Anderson told the reporter that the greatest moment of her life was the day she went home and told her mother that she wouldn't have to take in the washing anymore."²

Perspective is very important in faithful Christian living. In our prosperity with our safeguards and comforts it is very easy to either shy away from a passage like the one in Luke's Gospel or to try to push to a place it doesn't want to go. Jesus spoke plainly on the plain because God's view of the disciples was that they needed to hear and respond. That message was not intended for first century ears alone but for all of us here today. May we respond under the gaze of Christ. Amen.

² McGinnis, Alan Loy 2008 *The Friendship Factor*, Manjul Publishing p. 30.