

The Sixth Sunday of Ordinary Time 2019

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Luke 6.17, 20-26

+In the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit. **Amen.**

God prefers poor people.

And not, like, *metaphorically* poor people. This is one way in which Luke's gospel is superior to Matthew's, which specifies "the poor in spirit", thus—rightly or wrongly—allowing middle class Anglicans to feel a little bit better about ourselves. Who knows what it means to be "poor in spirit", but maybe-just-maybe we can be *that* without being *poor* poor. Maybe it's like when we tell someone that we will be with them in spirit, by which we mean that we won't be there at all.

Anyway, Matthew gives us a convenient way out, but not Luke. Blessed are you *poor*, simpliciter: those who hunger with their stomachs, and weep

tears, and are hated and excluded by flesh and blood.

God prefers poor people, and we should not now be surprised. Some think that 20th century South American liberation theologians invented the idea of God's *preferential option for the poor* but if that's true, then the Church really hasn't been paying attention to her own Scriptures. Luke's gospel alone is emphatic on this point.

From its opening chapter, Luke employs the rhetoric of reversal that regular members of this congregation will find familiar, favoured as it is among the occupants of this pulpit. You have heard many times about how the gospel subverts this or that value that we have imbibed, that we have in our incomprehension and insecurity manufactured. Jesus is, as you know well, the great violator-of-expectations, the great turner-of-things-on-their-heads.

But it is his mother, who does so first in Luke's gospel, who in her Magnificat—which we recite daily at evensong—proclaims that God hath put down the mighty from their seat while exalting the

humble and meek; God hath filled the hungry with good things, and the rich he hath sent empty away. It would seem that Mary's revolutionary anthem took root in our Lord's gestating mind.

But it is not only in the Sermon on the Plain that Jesus compares the poor favourably against the rich. Consider the parable of the poor beggar Lazarus and the rich man whom Jesus does not bother to name. In this story, we are not explicitly told that the rich man is being punished for neglecting Lazarus's plight: rather, Abraham simply tells him that he has in his lifetime already received his good things and Lazarus in like manner evil things: and now Lazarus is comforted, and the rich man is in anguish.

And again, when a rich ruler approaches him, Jesus tells him to rid himself of his earthly wealth for the good of the poor, to store up treasures in heaven. This he finds he cannot do, which leads Jesus to conclude that it is easier for a camel to go through the eye of a needle than it is for a rich man to enter the kingdom. This story, unlike the Magnificat and the parable of Lazarus and the Rich Man appears in all three synoptic gospels, even in Matthew, this

time unadulterated by any hint of convenient spiritualisation.

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God prefers poor people. Which is to say that, whenever I feel annoyed by the woman on the street corner waving a copy of the *Big Issue* in my face; whenever I avert my gaze from the panhandler huddled up outside the supermarket with his dog; whenever I am tempted to think that the British and American white working class can no longer be trusted with democracy, God and I have a fundamental disagreement.

It is not with condescension, let alone with outright disdain that God gazes upon the people we are so ready to ignore, except to stereotype and blame for our latest political woes, as if they were not also victims of the very economic systems that have benefitted us, simply exercising the limited agency they have.

Blessed he calls them, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven. Not that that does them any good right now, feeds or clothes them, gives them shelter from

the elements and balm for their wounds, visible and invisible. Not unless we too take seriously the reality of the kingdom, and our part and place in it.

Which is perhaps why what comes directly after these blessings and woes is—as we will hear more about next Sunday—a series of commands to us, well-known the world over for their idealism and our general failure to live up to them. Among these commands is the injunction to *give to every one who begs from you; and of him who takes away your goods do not ask them again*. This is a command for those of us who have, whose participation in the kingdom is called to be a blessing to those who do not have.

But the implication that God favours the poor is not just that we too should favour the poor, but that we should *be* poor. Nobody wants that: nobody wants to be poor. I certainly don't, who not infrequently scours the Internet for a job that might pay me more than an academic salary, until I realise that I'm not really prepared to do anything else for a living.

And yet, unlike the rest of us, what Jesus commands, he already does himself. He, who in his

divinity is ruler of all things, gives it all up to be with his people. Indeed, Jesus is poor—the itinerant Jew under Roman occupation, who has no place to lay his head—because the poor are his people, and his solidarity is a sign of this belonging: in contrast, I have been speaking as if “the poor” are other, are an outgroup, and that is because they are, to the extent that like the rich ruler, I have not divested my wealth for the blessing of the poor and for my own blessed poverty. And so, in this respect at least, I do not belong to people of Jesus.

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This is a hard pill to swallow. Particularly because most of us don't *feel* rich, especially not in this town, the UK's most expensive city to live in as a function of income. All the same, we chose to live here, and it takes less than you might think to count among Britain's wealthiest: an annual household income of £50,000 puts you in the top 10%.¹

And so the question for us is not *whether* to take Jesus seriously on wealth and poverty: that must be

¹ https://www.ifs.org.uk/tools_and_resources/where_do_you_fit_in

taken for granted if we are to call ourselves Christians. The clue is in the name. The question is how our lives—including our wealth—require re-organising in light of God’s preferential option for the poor. And the answer is, of course, to *give*: to give to the poor until we too are poor. A poor church for the poor, as Pope Francis is fond of saying. And no, our obligations do not kick in only after the liquidation and redistribution of the Vatican’s treasury.

God knows I haven’t figured out what any of this means in terms of pounds and pence, and whether the difference between income and asset has any moral significance in heaven’s kingdom as we are called to live it here on this side of glory. I suspect not. But we have our marching orders, and they are as clear as they have ever been. The great turner-of-things-on-their-heads has come to redefine personal financial planning.

+In the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit. **Amen.**