

Sermon for SJB and SSC third Sunday before lent 13/2/22

1. We only get intriguing snippets from the gospels on Sundays, don't we? If you read a gospel straight through, just as you would a very short book, you get a much better idea of what it's all about and with lent fast approaching that would be a very good exercise. This year the lectionary focuses mainly on Luke and he's a great read. It's important to remember that unlike the other three gospel writers, Luke is a gentile like us - not a member of first century Jewish society but a first century outsider looking in at that very particular oppressed and divided nation. He he'd not actually met with Jesus in the flesh but compiled his gospel from interviewing those who had and very importantly from accompanying Paul on his missionary journeys. In those days not so long after Jesus's death and resurrection there was a great row going on in the early church about how gentiles could now become followers of Jesus.

Choosing and ordering their material is a key task for any writer. Of course all four gospels tell us the same basic story of our saviour Jesus Christ, but the lenses through which they see him and present him are their own. Luke emphasises in particular Jesus's inclusive message to all marginalised peoples and his warnings to the rich, well fed, influential and self satisfied and that is clearly the emphasis in today's gospel reading.

A couple of weeks ago we read Luke's account of Jesus setting out his manifesto in his hometown synagogue in Nazareth. He takes up the precious scroll of the prophecies of Isaiah and reads out the famous passage about healing the blind and deaf and lame and bringing good news to the oppressed, the poor and broken hearted. He then rolls up the scroll, proclaiming himself as the fulfilment of this prophecy.

The people who've known him since his childhood are enraged by this and he narrowly escapes being lynched so he moves out to the little town of Capernaum on the shores of the inland sea of Galilee.

There he begins to deliver mightily on this awesome manifesto. The power of the Holy Spirit is seen clearly in him and his amazing healings and preaching are drawing vast crowds.

He spends a night in prayer on the mountain before selecting twelve of his disciples to accompany him closely for the next three years, as he begins an itinerant ministry. After a roller coaster ride they will finally commit the rest of their lives, regardless of the dangers or the enormity of the task, to passing on what they have discovered through their own experience of Jesus. At this point they have absolutely no idea of what lies before them. Just as well or they might have run a mile!

Today's reading begins after Jesus's night on the mountain and the selection of his mission team.

He comes down the mountain with them and stands on a level plain, a sea of faces before him - the twelve, another wider band of disciples and a vast crowd from miles around who've come hoping to be healed of their many afflictions. Everyone wants to touch him.

2. Yes, Jesus is already delivering mightily on his manifesto and many in the crowd are those he specifically referred to in it- -the poor and hungry and sick and broken hearted. Jesus has a very special, quite unexpected message for them: “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”.

It’s hard for us to imagine what it felt like to be spoken to like this in that particular society where God was seen to care for only the devout and pious - -those whose situation in life enabled them to observe all the religious rules and rituals. The vast numbers of poor and hungry and oppressed were utterly marginalised. Women were marginalised too.

In Matthew the more familiar beatitudes- -the list of blessings- -from the sermon on the mount is longer and more spiritual in emphasis. It’s aimed particularly at the religious authorities and their hypocrisy. Luke is writing about the sermon on the plain and the literally hungry and poor and marginalised.

Let’s be clear: Jesus is not saying it’s a good thing to be poor and hungry and marginalised and that we should actually aspire to be in that state in order to be blessed. Not at all. Rather that God cares especially for those who are in that state and gives them the value that the rest of society does not.

The warnings to the rich, well fed and self satisfied have two implications. 1. Life is precarious and they can’t rely on things staying the same. If it it’s taught us nothing else, the pandemic has certainly made us aware of that! 2. It also jolts them into the need to look around at their less fortunate fellow human beings and to be generous, inclusive, seeing every human being with God’s eyes, valuing them as he does.

So where does that leave us as followers of this same Jesus as we read these words today?

Like me quite a few of you will have grown up in the lean years of the nineteen forties and fifties..In those days our church held wonderful jumble sales and as my Grandma was one of the helpers she always came away with a good selection and would alter things and trim them up to be better than new!

Once she got us some nighties for threepence each and we laughed and called them our threepenny nighties.

The church was the centre of our lives back then, not only for worship but all manner of activities and assistance. I felt loved and included and valued there. Maybe I was lucky! I know others whose memories of being patronised are quite painful.

Right now in our own country there’s huge concern about increases in the cost of living, the need for food banks, fuel poverty, homelessness, child poverty and hunger. When we think globally the situation is quite frankly, horrifying.

3 There are many others in our society who feel marginalised for other reasons too..gender, ethnicity, sexual orientation and disabilities of all kinds .

Simply closing our eyes to all of this or wringing our hands and feeling guilty and helpless won't get us anywhere. We each must do our part in whatever ways are possible in our own particular circumstances to live out kingdom values in our own lives. Not in a showy way but always listening and responding deep within ourselves to God's call to value other human beings as he does- -as unique and precious and infinitely loved. This includes ourselves too.

That sounds very simple but simple doesn't mean easy.

All our circumstances are different and also none of us will be free from prejudices and aversions of various kinds. Recognising these as we journey through life is such an important part of growing in grace.

Our gospel reading ends with Jesus's warning to any who want to follow him that it won't be an easy road and might well lead to problems of rejection, false accusations and even loss of life. Jesus is a realist. Learn from history he says to those first hearers. This is the way your ancestors treated the prophets. The persecution of Christians has never ceased since then in different times and places and is happening now.

We who aspire to follow Jesus in our increasingly secular society today are unlikely to face direct persecution but you never know!

The main danger seems to be the church itself becoming marginalised, being regarded as increasingly irrelevant.

But Jesus's message is absolutely relevant for all humanity, past, present and future. As all human institutions including churches rise and fall his light will never be extinguished. We here in this time and place have good news to live out and to share and we must get on with it.

Let's take fresh heart from our first reading from St Paul, reminding us yet again that:

Alleluia Christ is risen

He is risen indeed, Alleluia!

Carole Lewis