

Brancepeth Sermon: Blessings and Woes

Third Sunday before Lent

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Jeremiah 17:5–10; 1 Corinthians 15:12–20; Luke 6:17–26

*Open our ears, O Lord,
to hear your word and know your voice.
Speak to our hearts and strengthen our wills,
that we may serve you today and always. Amen*

In our Gospel just now, we heard Luke’s version of the beatitudes.

You might be more familiar with the version in Matthew,

which we tend to hear more often:

‘Blessed are the poor in spirit, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven.

‘Blessed are those who mourn, for they will be comforted.

‘Blessed are the meek, for they will inherit the earth’

– and so on.

Some people like the Luke version better,
because it's a bit more concrete:
where Matthew has Jesus talking about the 'poor *in spirit*'
Luke talks more bluntly about 'the poor';
where Matthew talks about
'those who hunger and thirst *after righteousness*',
Luke talks about 'you who are hungry now'.
Luke's version seems more down to earth, more practical,
more focused on everyday needs.

Some people like Luke's version less, however,
simply because after the blessings, we get a set of *woes*.

'Woe to you who are rich!'

'Woe to you who are full now!'

'Woe to you who are laughing!'

Woes are, understandably,

a lot more uncomfortable than blessings.

Yet they, too, are a necessary part of Jesus' message.

Sometimes 'Woe to you!' is exactly what we need to hear.

Last week, for instance, we had a sermon from Geoff –

a very necessary sermon, I think –

which you could fairly summarise as

‘Woe to you who sit complacently by

while your climate warms!’

‘Woe to you who continue to burn fossil fuels

at the same old rate!’

‘Woe to you who don’t think twice

about the amount of meat you consume!’

Sometimes, a list of woes is just what we need to hear.

And, after all, Geoff didn’t use language

as sharp as Jeremiah’s, from our Old Testament reading.

If Jeremiah had preached last week,

he’d have said we were *cursed*.

Luke’s relating of both blessings and woes from Jesus

captures something deep about Jesus’ teaching –

indeed, about Jesus’ whole ministry.

Jesus' whole message, his whole life,
speaks both 'blessing' and 'woe' to the world –
both encouragement and challenge,
both healing and disruption,
both life and death.

On the one hand,
Jesus' whole life was a word of encouragement.
In word and deed, he told people, he *showed* people
that God loved them.

He loved them with God's love;
he *was* God's way of loving them.

He showed them that God heard their cries,
that God met them in their illnesses and disabilities,
in their bereavement, in their hunger and poverty,
and raised them up.

In Jesus, God showed Godself to be a God of new life –
a God of resurrection
– and Jesus showed us that there is nowhere we can go
where we were beyond God's reach,

that we are never so deep into the darkness

that God's light can't reach us, light our path and warm us.

Jesus' life was a word of divine encouragement to the world.

But Jesus also challenged, he also disrupted.

He was the stone to make us all stumble.

He called people to repentance –

away from their existing patterns of life, their commitments,

the things in which they had invested their trust.

And he challenged the more,

the more power his audience had –

the more influence, the richer, the more complacent,

the less hungry they were.

This ministry of challenging was not in any tension

with his work of encouragement.

When you love people,

when you want to see people

strengthened, healed, upheld, and lifted up

– well, you hate what harms them.

If you really love them, *of course* you're going to stand against the injustice, the inequality, the exclusion, the lack of mercy, the lack of kindness that harms them.

You're going to call people out when they do harmful things, you're not going to let it slide by

And so *of course* Jesus was an awkward and uncomfortable presence – precisely *because* he was the loving encourager.

So: encouraging and challenging, blessings and woes, life and death:

that was the shape of Jesus' ministry,

And that's a ministry – a task, a need –

that every single one of us,

every single person sitting in this congregation this morning

– is called to share.

You are called to encourage, to strengthen.

You are called to see when those around you
are in need, in sorrow, in difficulty,
and to help them, to comfort them, to be with them,
and to communicate to them in deed and word the love of God,
to let them know that they are upheld
in the loving hands of God.

Sometimes you *are* those hands.

Or at least you're one of the tangible forms
that the hands of God can take for that person
in this moment.

So you are called to encourage, to bless.

But you are also called to say 'Woe!',
in the sense that you are called to challenge,
to question those around you
who are caught in destructive patterns of behaviour,
to question institutions behaving badly,
to call out unkindness and exclusion.

Most of us, from time to time, have the opportunity,
and so the responsibility,
to get in the way of the forces, the behaviours,
the decisions that harm people.

Most of us, from time to time, have the opportunity
to be *awkward*,
to make it just a bit harder for injustice, for unkindness,
for exclusion, for marginalisation,
to roll smoothly on.

So you have a vocation, all of you.

We *each* have a vocation
to discover the ways in which we can be blessings and, yes,
the way in which we can be curses,
to see to whom and how we can communicate God's love,
and to see where we need to call people to account,
to get in the way of harm.

The reason I'm focusing on all this is that
today is Vocation Sunday,
a day for thinking specifically about the ways in which
God might be calling us to this work of
encouragement and challenge.

That call works at all sorts of different levels.

At one level – not an unimportant level, far from it;
in some ways this is the *most* important –
at one level to think about vocation means
all of us thinking about the situations
in which we find ourselves:
the relationships,
the organisations, the groups.

It means us thinking about the forms of pain,
of suffering, of loss, of sadness, of frustration
that we see, and asking
what we can do to show people the love of God,
what we can say to help them hear it.

And, yes, it means asking what we can do to challenge,
to question, interrupt, the stuff that needs interrupting,
the injustice, the unkindness, the exclusion, the complacency.

That is a *vocation* – a *calling* – for all of us:

the Jesus who issues these blessings and these woes
calls us *all* to follow in his footsteps, wherever we are.

Alongside that, though,

and both supported by it and supporting it,
some of you might be being called to more visible,
more formal, more deliberate forms of this ministry.

You might have a vocation, a calling, to take on a *new* role,
perhaps as a school governor, or as a pastoral visitor,
or in a position of responsibility in the community association,
or some new responsibility at work, whatever it might be –
something new for you, but something where
you begin to sense you might make a difference.

Hearing such a call is most often simply a combination of
your noticing an opportunity
that happens to be open to you,
and realising that you have skills or interests or enthusiasms
that happen to fit it:
opportunity and ability combine to give you a sense that
something might be possible there –
something demanding but exciting.

You begin to fizz or itch with the possibility that
there's somewhere new you could be,
something new you could be doing
and perhaps *should* be doing –
somewhere new where you might be
an encourager or a challenger or both
– a speaker of blessing or, where necessary, a speaker of woe.

And for some of you, that might mean a vocation,
a calling, specifically to take up
some new formal role in the church –

to take up a new role in the worshipping,
the outreach,
the life of this congregation or of the wider church;
to consider ministry as a reader, perhaps,
or even to consider ordination.

God might be calling *you* to become
an encourager of the encouragers,
a challenger of the challengers –
one of the support systems for this whole work of
encouragement and challenge,
in which we are all called to be involved.

Don't simply sit there now,
and think to yourself that this is the bit of the sermon
where I've stopped talking to *you*.

Think about it.

You are *definitely*, each one of you, called to the work of
encouragement and challenge.

You're *definitely* called to think about what opportunities and possibilities are open to you for following in Jesus' footsteps in speaking blessing and woe. But what if – even if you've never thought about it before – what if God is *also* calling you in this other way too, to some kind of visible, recognised ministry in the church? It's not that that would be more important than other vocations, it's not that it matters more or is more necessary – it's not! – but it is *one* of the ways God calls people, it is *one* of the forms of calling that the church needs, and it only ever happens because people like you one day shift from thinking that such calling only ever happens to other people to thinking that maybe, just maybe, it's for you.

So, that's *my* piece of encouragement and my challenge today.

The *encouragement* is to tell you that

God definitely calls you.

God calls each one of you into the work of
encouraging and challenging, loving and questioning.

And the *challenge* is to think hard,
today and over the coming week,
about the form that this calling might be taking for you.

What is God calling *you*, specifically to do –
who is God calling *you* to be?

How are you being called to speak blessing and woe?

*God our Father, Lord of all the world,
through your Son you have called us
into the fellowship of your universal Church:
hear our prayer for your faithful people
that in their vocation and ministry
each may be an instrument of your love;
through our Lord and Saviour Jesus Christ,
who is alive and reigns with you,
in the unity of the Holy Spirit,
one God, now and for ever. Amen.*