Lectio Divina – 6th Sunday of the Year C

Contexts

Luke's Gospel (in brief)

- Composed between 80-90 CE
- Part of a 2 volume work (together with The Acts of the Apostles).
- 2nd Century tradition names the work for Luke and claims he was the same person as the companion of Paul. However, there are significant differences between Paul's writing and what appears in Luke about Paul's writing which seems to suggest that the author of Luke was not the Luke referred to in Paul's letters.
- Author is clearly an educated man and a city-dweller, not a country-sider.
- Sources include Mark's Gospel and the Q source and a good deal of other material.
- From Mark: the narrative detail about Jesus' life
- From Q, the 'sayings' (teachings) of Jesus.
- Don't really know where the other material comes from, e.g. the infancy & childhood narratives.
- Work is addressed to "Theophilus" which means "Lover of God" – this could be a specific individual, or simply every Christian.
- An ordered account of life of Jesus and apostles
- **Structure of Luke's Gospel**
  Following the author's preface addressed to his patron and the two birth narratives (John the Baptist and Jesus), the gospel opens in Galilee and moves gradually to its climax in Jerusalem

  A brief preface addressed to Theophilus stating the author's aims;
  1. Birth and infancy narratives for both Jesus and John the Baptist, interpreted as the dawn of the promised era of Israel's salvation;
  2. Preparation for Jesus' messianic mission: John's prophetic mission, his baptism of Jesus, and the testing of Jesus' vocation;
  3. The beginning of Jesus' mission in Galilee, and the hostile reception there;
  4. The central section: the journey to Jerusalem, where Jesus knows he must meet his destiny as God's prophet and messiah;
  5. His mission in Jerusalem, culminating in confrontation with the leaders of the Jewish Temple;
  6. His last supper with his most intimate followers, followed by his arrest, interrogation, and crucifixion;
  7. God's validation of Jesus as Christ: events from the first Easter to the Ascension, showing Jesus' death to be divinely ordained, in keeping with both scriptural promise and the nature of messiahship, and anticipating the story of Acts

Luke 6:17, 20-26 – things to notice

- The Sermon on the Plain – note different emphasis and location to Matthew's, *Sermon on the Mount*. Luke has used, but changed quite considerably, Matthew's account.
- We will read the Sermon on the Plain over three Sundays, beginning with this Sunday. So, we need to see the continuity of the texts and not take them out of the context of the Sermon.
- Setting: Jesus had gone up the mountain to pray and choose from among his disciples 12 apostles (corresponding to the 12 tribes of Israel and thus showing a continuity between ancient Israel and Jesus gathering the reconstituted Israel – one of Luke's big themes).

- We begin this week's reading with Jesus and the 12 descending the mountain and stopping at a 'piece of level ground' where we find a large gathering of his disciples and a great crowd of people from all over the place. (Note: the use of 'gathering').
- Jesus addresses his disciples, not the larger crowd. So, we might think of this as a teaching about discipleship.
- Note that Jesus' address contains 4 blessings and 4 woes.
- In context, 'Blessed' is a better translation than 'happy'. Traditionally, a beatitude is a cry of joyful congratulation that recognises an existing state of happiness. A 'woe' is a lament over an existing state of apparent happiness which will end in disaster.
- Note that through the Sermon of the Plain Luke strips out Matthew's spiritual and religious concerns. 'They refer bluntly to concrete socio-economic and earthly realities – poverty, hunger, sorrow, exclusion.' (BOTW).
- Note: 'you who are (actually economically) poor' – not *poor in spirit*.
- You who are hungry now – not *who hunger and thirst for justice*.
- You who weep – *not those who mourn*.
- Luke omits Matthew's references to *the meek, the merciful and the pure of heart*.
- Luke includes Matthew's beatitude about those persecuted on account of the Son of Man. These will be numbered among the prophets!
- Woes – Note: Matthew has no woes in his Sermon. Note the contrasts that Luke sets up between now (the present) and the future.
- You who are rich and are having your consolation *now*
- You who are full *now* – you will go hungry
- You have laugh *now* – you will mourn and weep
- You the world speaks well of – you are false prophets!
- This is blunt, hard-hitting stuff. Luke is keen that the Beatitudes as given in Matthew are not 'spiritualised' into a nice idea but reflect the time when God will clean up the mess made by human hands with judgement and action (Kingdom moments).
- Note: the 'future' in Luke is not about the big reversal which might take place when the Kingdom finally comes in all its fullness or when we die. It is about what happens when the reign of God breaks into human reality (as it does in the word & ministry of Jesus) and brings about a radical reversal of fortunes.
- The following Sunday readings from the Sermon on the Plain will make clear that the way to salvation for the rich is in lending and sharing possessions, in not seeking status and remaining committed to the teaching of Jesus.
- For Luke attachment to material possessions, status and power pose real dangers for would-be disciples.
- It is significant that in Jesus blessing the poor, hungry, weeping and excluded people Luke is saying that these people are NOT excluded from the reign of God's love and mercy (as contemporary religious thought in the time of Jesus said they were). Thus 'sinners' can join the company of the 'blessed'.

The Liturgical Context – why does the church choose this passage to reflect on this Sunday?

The First Reading from the prophet Jeremiah introduces the idea of 'blessing' and 'curse' (woe) and contrasts the two. The curse is on those who put their trust in man, the flesh, and turns from the Lord. They shrivel up like trees planted in the salt-lands. A blessing on the man who puts his trust and hope in the Lord. He thrives like a tree by the waterside and never ceases to bear fruit.

'Even casual readers of the four Gospels quickly see that each one offers its own distinct portrait of Jesus. Part of the powerful appeal of Luke's Jesus lies in the stories he tells of God's boundless mercy, in the distinctive role he gives to women, and in his generous giving and receiving of hospitality.

'More than any other evangelist, Luke has Jesus insist repeatedly on the need for his followers to embrace poverty and to be under no illusions about the danger of wealth. Jesus is blunt and uncompromising, as we find today.

'If we are to enter into the mystery of God's love for the poor, we must ourselves become poor. Those who remain possessed by their possessions and the privileges they bring are unable to receive the gift of salvation.' (BOTW)

Reflection

Over the next three Sundays we will listen to almost the whole of Luke's *Sermon on the Plain*. Luke has used Matthew's *Sermon on the Mount* but changed and shortened it significantly. It is important to realise that both Sermons are more than only the Beatitudes which begin them.

In Luke, Jesus' words are addressed to the disciples, not to the gathered crowd, so we might think of the sermon as a teaching about discipleship.

The whole of the Sermon is quite confronting and challenging, especially those verses which form today's Gospel reading. The Sermon begins with four blessings and four woes.

At first glance it is very odd to call people who are poor, hungry, weeping and hated blessed, fortunate or happy. But we have to hear the words of Jesus in the context of the religious teaching and general thinking which belonged to his time. Then, it was generally thought that those who suffered these things were experiencing the effects of either their own personal sinfulness or that of an ancestor. Similarly, those with wealth, plenty of food and high status were considered blessed and rewarded by God.

In the beatitudes Jesus reverses this way of thinking and effectively says that the opposite is true: God is, in fact, on the side of the poor and suffering. They experience suffering through no fault of their own (e.g., sin), it is simply the situation in which they find themselves. As the woes ('Alas for you…') make clear, the rich have a great deal to lose. The poor and suffering are fortunate in Jesus' view because they have a need which the overflowing generosity of God can fill. They are in situations which attract God's impulse to save. The Kingdom of God is already among them.

All things being equal, being wealthy, well-fed, happy and enjoying a good reputation are perfectly desirable. But in Jesus' view all things are not equal. Often the poor are poor precisely because the rich are rich. The powerless suffer at the hands of those who have power and influence. 'The rich get richer, and the poor get poorer' is a saying that endures even to this day.

Throughout his Gospel, Luke has Jesus insist repeatedly on the need for his followers to embrace poverty and to be under no illusions about the danger of wealth. Those who remain possessed by their possessions and the privileges they bring are unable to receive the gift of salvation, but even they can join the blessed through their care of the poor.