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What does it mean to be blessed? (Luke 6:17-26 and 1 Cor. 15:12-20)

Take a moment to think about what makes you happy? Perhaps it's a nice holiday, a decent meal, having a laugh with friends or family. Jesus' words to his disciples in today's gospel seems to interrupt our usual understanding of what it means to be truly happy.

The actual word Jesus uses is "blessed" (which in the Greek is *makarios*) a word that moves beyond "happy" and towards something describing deep, divine-like, joy.

If we were to put Jesus' words into our context today, we might hear them as:

"Joyful are those who are struggling to make ends meet and lack financial security

Joyful are those who don't have enough to eat

Joyful are those who cry and are in distress

Joyful are those whose lives and family's lives are under threat for their faith in me.

But be careful if we have healthy bank accounts

Be alert if we will have three full meals today

Be warned if our lives are filled with fun and laughter, while we know others suffer

Be warned if we are considered successful and worthy by society around us."

Hopefully these words should give pause for thought when we see pictures posted on social media of seemingly successful lives and achievements with the caption "hashtag blessed."

But equally, how should we understand Jesus words, without demeaning those who are genuinely impoverished, those who are going hungry today, those who are mourning the loss of loved ones, or facing death and imprisonment for their Christian faith? How does affirming that they are blessed by God avoid sounding cheap and facile amid the real suffering and pain of the world?

Often the way we rationalise this is to think that, yes in the future when God's kingdom comes the poor and persecuted *will be* revealed as the true inheritors of God's kingdom. That their blessedness or joy is a *future event*, in the age to come. Certainly, there is a future promise here: "the hungry *will be filled*, those

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who weep *will* laugh, for their reward is great in heaven.” But Jesus’ words are also that the outcast and rejected ARE blessed– ALREADY. Blessed ARE the poor, blessed ARE the hungry, blessed ARE the reviled. Presently, here and now.

One of the privileges of being a priest to be with people in the ups and downs of life. Through this I see over and over again in our parish, wonderfully faithful people who even though things seem to be going badly and superficially there is every reason to despair; yet the joy of God’s life shines in and through them in the bleakest of moments and darkest times of their lives. Despite all that’s going on they remain persistent and joyful in God’s love and so become sources of God’s blessing to those around them. And if you’re like me and wish that you felt this deep sense of joy when you feel at your most broken and shattered, it’s worth remembering that Jesus words are more like an objective statement, than a subjective feeling. Like a magnifying glass, that though may itself feel cold, can set something else on fire.

Because although Jesus’ words are paradoxical, it should not surprise us that those who are outcast and rejected are those who most clearly grasp the deep joy of knowing God’s love. This is a lesson that even my 15 month-old son Jos has already learned. He will come into the living room and pull out all the toys, and then toddle around the room picking up different the toys and objects... But when he sees something really special, the thing with the greatest value– which is usually the most dangerous or destructive item in the room, he knows that to grasp hold of it, he must lay down whatever else he is holding on to. He must let go, and approach with empty hands, in order to receive the best thing of all!

The problem for us, just like for Jos, is knowing *what* the greatest gift is, especially when we are surrounded by so many great gifts. And here amongst the wealth and privilege of Chelsea we need to be confronted by Jesus’ warning. That these good gifts of food, health, wealth, status etc can become blockages to us seeing these as *gifts from God*, not as ends in themselves, and therefore miss out on receiving the fullness of the source of this goodness. The gift of God himself.

Woe to us who cannot taste the goodness of God because we are already full with the bland offerings of this world that never fully satisfy. Blessed are those who see with more clarity God’s goodness because they are less invested and celebrated in the twisted world we create for ourselves.

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And as Paul reminds us in his letter to the church in Corinth, it is our trust in the risen Christ which is the greatest joy of all. This upside-down truth is the pattern of the new reality established in Christ; true life *through death*.

One of the interesting differences in Luke's account of the beatitudes from Matthew's, is that Matthew's recalls this teaching as part of Jesus' Sermon on the Mount. However, here Luke's version is depicted as the "sermon on the plain." It begins with Luke telling us "He came down with them and stood on a level place." Jesus is not lecturing his disciples from on high, teaching them from above, but he comes among them. Jesus is telling his disciples they are blessed because he is with them, among them, now. Jesus' teaching in Luke is presented more like a half-time team talk, a half-time huddle, with him right in the midst of them. He is saying that even now, even in the pain and suffering of the world, they can be joyful because he is with them.

In Jesus, we see that the person who most brightly radiates God's blessing for the world, ends up rejected and crucified on the cross. That it is here at the cross, where God's blessing is poured out and overflows, where true life is found. At the cross, we are called to let go of all else, approaching with open and empty hands, because in the risen Christ we know a final and lasting joy that can never be overcome.

Amen.