

Bennochy 17th February 2013

What is it we look for in life, that seems to me is a fundamental question? How would we quantify the ideal life, what would it look like? If you had three choices; health, wealth and happiness, what would be your priority? If only it was that easy. We know that life requires all three. We all want to be free from “dis-ease”, to have enough money to give us ‘choices’ in life and an inner feeling of contentment that comes from a life free from worry.

We also know that life just isn’t like that. That is not our experience. There are times when our minds and bodies suffer pain, there is not enough money to do all the things we would like to, and there are those moments we lie awake worrying about someone or something. These things mean we are human. That is the way we have been made.

It is no surprise then, that people crowd around Jesus, to hear his words that bring some meaning and understanding to life, to have troubled minds calmed and people stretching out their hands to touch him that their hurting bodies might be healed.

Visualise that scene, for Luke then jumps from this picture of humanity and the powerful action of Jesus, to the words we knew as the Beatitudes. The more familiar version is found in Matthew 5 and in Matthew’s gospel, the wider context is the *Sermon on the mount*.

There is a parallel being drawn in Matthew, between Jesus on the hillside and another famous man, where great events seemed to happen to him on mountains. That man was Moses. The law of God, was given to Moses on Mount Sinai, here, the new law of God is given by Jesus, the new Moses. That comparison would resonate with his Jewish listeners. Note that for Luke it does not happen on a hillside at all, but on a level place. His readers were gentiles so the comparison with Moses was not required.

The first thing that needs to be said is that the word happy is not a good translation, it should be read as ‘*blessed*’; for we are not talking here about our human emotion that makes us happy, but the consequence of living in such a way that means we receive the blessing of God. We need to begin with that difference in mind.

“Blessed are you poor, the Kingdom of God is yours” What a powerful statement to make. Jesus says; to receive God and his Kingdom you need to be... well, what is poverty? There is no doubt that if people struggle to survive, then there seems to be a greater reliance on God. Have you not been amazed at people, mainly in other parts of the world, who live with nothing or all they have has been taken away and yet they still have a strong faith in God. What a witness to us! In spite of their poverty, faith is strong and Jesus says and the Kingdom of God

belongs to them, and remember, most people in the 1st century Jewish world were literally poor.

The next question that follows is this, what does this verse say to us, who live in comparable wealth, interesting like the wealthier, urban, gentile readers of Luke? Matthew has thought of that, *“Blessed are those who know they are spiritually poor”*. And we can say, that is us.

Is the mark of common humanity, not the mark of struggle, where in spite of our circumstance we come to rely not on our own strength, but on the love of God, and through that love we are fed by God and our laughter is that of a joy that can only come from God.

That is too easy! I don't know why people die of poverty or disease or war or why some people's lives seem to be one disaster after another. The writer of the book of Job wants to wipe away the idea that if you live a righteous life you will be blessed by God and vice versa. If that is not true, then either God does not exist, or he does not care, or he is right in the midst of the suffering. [Quote: Glimpses of God p.4] I think all we can say is this, whether we live in constant fear of death or life is so hard or it is just us, God says trust me, have faith. To be blessed is to strive to live by faith.

The Kingdom of God is a strange animal. It is here, ushered in by God through Jesus Christ, yet not totally fulfilled. We live in this

'in-between' time, where there are more questions than answers, people struggle to survive, there is death, physical and emotional disease; through all of this, Jesus says, I am in the midst, have faith in me.

“Blessed are you poor, the Kingdom of God is yours”

If these are the words of comfort, Jesus words quickly change to ones of challenge. How often the scriptures are like that, because they turn the values of the world upside down! Be glad when you are persecuted, as many of Luke's readers would have experienced. If life is rubbish now, for whatever reason, hold on, persevere, God has not forgotten you. In the midst of trial, God's blessing is still upon us.

“For this reason we never become discouraged. Even though our physical being is gradually decaying, yet our spiritual being is renewed day after day. And this small and temporary trouble we suffer will bring us a tremendous and eternal glory, much greater than the trouble. For we fix our attention, not on things that are seen, but on things that are unseen. What can be seen lasts only for a time, but what cannot be seen lasts forever.”

[Read 2nd Corinthians 4: 16-18]

And if you are rich, well, remember the story of the rich young ruler who went away sad and the image of the camel and the 'eye of the needle'. Jesus seems to be saying; the rich have had all their blessings here on earth.

Can I say this; the world needs people with money. If there was no money if could not be shared with others. Money does 'make the world go round'. The blessing of God comes from our good stewardship.

1st century human beings were no different from us, they also looked for health, wealth and happiness. If they could get a healing touch from Jesus, they took it, we would do the same. Many struggled to survive, life was not easy, but Jesus turns the priorities of today and directs people to what a life of faith means. Jesus would later say, don't worry about tomorrow, it will have enough worries of its own, but here, he speaks of a life in the Kingdom of God that is here and is still to come.

That he says, is what it means to be blessed, for blessings come from our struggling faith in God, there when we recognise them, and when they out of sight, there in times joy and sorrow, health or sickness, wealth or poverty.

"Blessed are you poor, the Kingdom of God is yours" Amen.