

Bennochy church 17th February 2019

I remember reading a book that brought together some of the great sermons of Martin Luther King. There was a moment, when this book, that was very influential for me. There are collections of poems, essays and greatest hits albums. People bring together what they believe to be, the best bits of an artist's work. I wonder if something similar happened in the gospel accounts of Jesus. I am certain that not every word he spoke, or every miracle he performed, every conversation, discussion, debate and argument he had, was recorded, and those things that were written down, were written down for a reason. For a purpose. When you read the gospels, you find a significant portion of them, is about the last week of his life.

There is a section in the gospel of Matthew known as the 'Sermon on the Mount'. Luke's version is shorter, and strangely, he says it happened on a level place, but many of the words are similar. I wonder, if these two gospel writers have compiled some of Jesus 'greatest hits', best phrases, for them the memorable bits, and located them all in the one place? So the power of these words, really have nothing to do with where they were spoken.

The scenario is a common one. The crowds have gathered to hear Jesus, and to be healed of their diseases. There is even talk of evil spirits. A language far removed from our modern thinking. Some people believing it relates to mental illness. As I

have said before, there is nothing like the rumour of miracles to attract a crowd. They seem to have come from the whole country. Luke is at pains to point this out. This is not just a local crowd. It would be like people coming from Aberdeen, Glasgow, and the borders to Kirkcaldy. If these locations are accurate, people have put in some effort to be there. Some might even have been desperate. The crowds are gathering. Should the authorities be worried? They already were!

Jesus already has a portfolio of miracles under his belt. He can already produce an impressive CV. I wonder what Alan Sugar would have thought of it! (The apprentice) He's done evil spirits, skin disease, paralysed man - that's the, 'let's climb up on the roof of a house, knock a hole in it, and lower our friend down in front of Jesus', story. We never hear of the reaction of the owner of that house! What about my roof? To all of that, Luke adds a little phrase, easily over looked. *All the people tried to touch him, for power was going out of him and healing them all.* It seems that all you had to do to be healed, was touch Jesus. It is as if Jesus had no control over what was happening. It just happened. In the healing process, power simply left him. So if you were ill, you were going to make sure you were there.

Some say that English is not a very exact language. We have the same word, and meaning is determined by the context. One example of that is the word 'happy'. In normal circumstances we

would understand 'happy', as being in a good state of human emotion. Things are going well. It is the opposite of being sad. If we approach these words of Jesus with that understanding, we will miss the point entirely. The Good News translation, has actually done us a disservice here, by using the translation 'happy'.

This part of the sermon on the mount, or in Luke's case, the level plain, is known as the Beatitudes. The root of that word, is a Latin word, 'beatus', which can mean happy, but I think, is better translated 'blessed'. The reason I say that, it is of God, and has nothing to do with our state of mind. These words of Jesus cannot somehow only apply to us, if "we" are feeling good. There is something else going on here that is far, far, more important.

The opening phrase of the first four beatitudes as described by Luke, are put as contradiction in terms. Blessed are you because; you are poor, you are hungry, you are weeping and you are rejected. Let's not be tempted here to over spiritualise these terms. I suspect for many listening to Jesus, these words actually describe how they lived. And to hammer home his point, the contradiction is then reversed.

Matthew is a bit more spiritual in his interpretation, but I think Luke's approach is more realistic. He knows for many, today is hard, but he says, Jesus message of the Kingdom of God, turns that reality upside down. Now here is the tricky bit. He is not

saying, even if the Kingdom begins now, you will be wealthy or have lots of food or never cry. That is not a promise Jesus ever makes. Life is not like that. In the future kingdom, you will be filled and you will laugh.

These are hard words to understand. If you push any image far enough, it falls apart! Our challenge, is to sit as 'in-betweeners'. The kingdom is here, that is what Jesus said, 2000 years further down the road, but still not yet fulfilled. And we know full well the reality of the words of Jesus, *you will always have the poor with you*. That reality has not changed.

Christian discipleship is about living now. Seeking and working for the Kingdom values of shalom, compassion and justice. So we might hear these words in a slightly different context, not one of our poverty, starvation or tears, but their meaning has not changed.

Are we happy? I hope so. Are we blessed? Yes we are. A blessing that has already begun and the one who blesses, is the same yesterday, today and forever. Amen.