

Septuagesima St Stephen's 9.30 & 11. Luke 6: 17f
13.2.22

Blessed are you who are poor;
Blessed are you who hunger now;
Blessed are you who weep now;
Blessed are you when men hate you;

But woe to the rich;
Woe to the well fed;
Woe to those who laugh;
Woe to you who are popular.

Those verses rather turn things upside -down. If we're honest, we don't think well of the poor; the hungry may prick our consciences but, all too often, nothing more; we tell those who weep, to put themselves together; and who among us wants to be hated?

Jesus goes on to warn about a self-indulgent lifestyle. The four woes capture much of what is wrong with society today. Wealth and the enjoyment of wealth is the pursuit of many; the good life as expressed through food and its depiction in so many TV programmes; a preoccupation with pleasure; and the longing of so many to be notable, made possible by Facebook, and much of which is anodyne and fatuous.

Jesus turns to hopes of so many on their heads, telling us that it is those who appear to be lost, are the blessed; and those who seek worldly honour, have their reward and find only failure at the end.

In recent week I've been thinking about the Church and where things were leading. On the one hand there are signs of growth as congregations reach out into society, seek to deepen their prayer life and waiting on God. Against this we see falling numbers in all the churches, and this has continued even after various initiatives like the Decade for Evangelism.

Are we barking up the wrong tree? The life of the Church is important and should be rooted in prayer and worship; but is getting bottoms on seats the priority? From an income point of view, yes; but it's not the primary duty of the Church. Surely our first duty is to be people in whom others see something of Jesus. Our focus is not the Church, but the world. We are to reach out and stand alongside those who are not its members, as Archbishop William Temple reminded us.

We are to follow the example of Jesus. He mixed with fishermen, tax gatherers and women and many other people who made up the bulk of society and were largely shunned by the religious folk of his day. He reached out to Gentiles, and the socially excluded like lepers - it's all there in the gospels. What he gave them was a sense of worth, of being taken account of.

This should be the pattern of the Church's mission. In the parable of the Last Supper, Jesus said that those accepted by God were those who fed the hungry, gave water to the

thirsty, hospitality to the stranger, clothing to the naked, help and comfort to the sick, and who visited the prisoners. There was no blessing for those who, as it were, simply went to church on Sunday.

This is a hard lesson for us to learn and will mean different things for each one of us. We will have to discover how we can be Christ to others away from the safety of the church. Community. It will help if we remember that it isn't success God wants, but faithfulness and the willingness if necessary, to fail, and then to start again.

I in no way want to play down the importance of the Christian community, which gives support and encouragement. It should also give us courage to be Christ to others. It may help us to remember that when we speak to someone else, there is something of God in that person – not easy if it is a young thug or rude shop- assistant. The modern hymn by Richard Gillard captures all this well:

Brother/Sister, let me be your servant,
let me be ask Christ to you;
pray that I may have the grace to
let you be my servant too.

This approach needs humility. We can only reach out to others if we are prepared to be vulnerable. So much of life today is judgemental, setting ourselves against anything which disturbs us, criticising before knowing all the facts or considering any counter-arguments, cynical about their actions.

Reading the gospels it is clear that many people were comfortable in Jesus' presence and were affirmed by him. I think it was W.H. Auden who said that in the company of good people he felt guilty; but in the company of a holy person he felt good in spite of his many faults. We are those who are called to holiness.

How are we to reach out? Perhaps the rest of the hymn I quoted earlier gives us a clue.

We are pilgrims on a journey
and companions on the road;
we are here to help each other,
walk the mile and bear the load.

I will hold the Christ-light for you
in the night-time of your fear;
I will hold me hand out to you,
speak the peace you long to hear.

I will weep when you are weeping
when you laugh I'll laugh with you,
I will share your joy and sorrow
till we've seen this journey through.
When we sing to God in heave
we shall find such harmony

born of all we known together
of Christ's love and agony.

A young woman, who had a deep Christian faith and welcomed the opportunity to speak of this, went to stay with cousins, whom she did not know well, for a family reunion. This made her reticent and she didn't mention faith once, though there were opportunities to have done so. On the day of her departure, an elderly relative asked her to go for a walk in the garden. As they walked, the old lady asked the young woman why her religious sister wasn't at the family gathering. "My life seems so barren and empty and I was so looking forward to hearing about her faith and whether she could help me."