

BLESSINGS AND WOES!

St Columba, 14 February 2010

Jeremiah 17:5-10
Luke 6:17-26

Introduction to Readings

The Gospel this morning has Luke's version of the so-called "Sermon on the Mount" of which you know, the list of "Blessed are" etc.

But there's a difference between this version and that in Matthew:

- Luke's seems more like the original - it's more concrete: "Blessed are you poor" rather than "poor in spirit".
- Luke has Jesus adding also some "Woe to you" etc. which turn the blessings upside down, condemning the rich and well-fed etc.
- and the whole "sermon" is much shorter here - actually, it's not really a sermon - and it wasn't on a mount! Luke speaks of Jesus "coming down to a level place".

Note also that the reading from Jeremiah has a similar pattern to Luke's version, with "curses" and "blessings" and the "curses" or "woes" come first in Jeremiah.

The writer of Luke's Gospel is placing Jesus in the tradition of the prophets, claiming him to be a *new* prophet, as great as Jeremiah, but different, making positive blessings more important than negative condemning.

Introduction

Last week Keith read a contemporary piece from OT scholar Walter Brueggemann, talking about the prophets.

Brueggemann says that the criticism the prophets make is always aimed at those in power - the kings, the religious leaders, the wealthy.

And the promises of renewed energy (or "empowerment") made by the prophets are directed towards those who have little by way of wealth or power.

Today's readings underline what Brueggemann is saying.

1. Jesus, the New Prophet

OT prophets like Jeremiah often make a point of the criticism, attacking those in power: "cursed are you", says Jeremiah.

Jesus, on the other hand, emphasises empowerment, new energy and status to those usually overlooked: "blessed are you", Jesus says. "Blessed are you who are poor, hungry."

Of course, both Jesus and Jeremiah do both these things, criticising and empowering, but it's the balance that's really interesting - I suggest, interesting for us, who seek to follow Jesus in some way.

I spent a chunk of last week writing a submission to the Parliamentary Select Committee looking at Rodney Hide's Bill on the new Auckland City.

I was more like an OT prophet! Lots of criticism!

Sometimes that's necessary in being critical, challenging what's being said or done but we need to be clear about who the challenge is directed to.

This week's policy announcement on tax - likely to give greater benefit to those who already have more - brings me to say it's time we spoke out against political policies that empower the already powerful!

Prophetic challenge again!

By using a formula similar to that used by Jeremiah, Luke suggests that Jesus stands in the tradition of the prophets.

But by changing the emphasis, starting with a series of blessings, talking to those usually seen as unimportant, Jesus comes across as a new kind of prophet.

2. The Prophetic Word Misused

When Brueggemann says that prophets like Jeremiah direct their curses against the powerful, he notes that the powerful people don't hear the criticism.

Actually, *I* think they *do* hear. But they (or we) hear it or choose to hear it as aimed at the majority of people, who have little resources and power.

Then **they themselves** (or we ourselves), those among us who are rich and powerful, assume they're the blessed ones!

How often do we hear that?

People who have status and power think they have all that because they're clever, or they earned it, or they're worth it, or they're blessed by God.

Then the woes and curses are used by those same powerful people or including, I'd have to say, powerful people in the religious community or they (or we) use the woes and curses **against** everyone else, as a way of keeping control!

The prophetic words or including the words of Jesus or are turned around, directed the opposite way, suggesting that wealth and power are good, and poverty and hardship are signs of something you've done wrong.

That's certainly not what the gospel says.

It's a perversion of the message: turned upside down for the benefit of those who **have**.

Conclusion

So, let's listen carefully to Jesus's prophetic message, and not be led astray by false prophets!

Those of us who have wealth and status need to hear clearly the challenge Jesus makes, that money and power carry responsibilities and dangers ó they are not blessings in themselvesí they are open to criticismí

Those of us who are **not** blessed with worldly wealth and power, however, **do** have status in God's eyes, **they/we** receive Jesus's blessingí

Everyone deserves adequate food, shelter, and access to decision-making, as blessed children of God.

I hope we can make sure we hear Jesus's good news the right way up!