

A Sermon by the Reverend Timothy A. R. Cole
The Sixth Sunday after the Epiphany (C)
Sunday, February 17, 2019

Jeremiah 17:5-10 | Psalm 1
1 Corinthians 15:12-20 | Luke 6:17-26

Back in the 1990s in my home town of Edinburgh, a young divorced woman with a child had hit hard times and was living on welfare. In a café on the Mound, just off the Royal Mile, she sat each day writing a children's story. You may have guessed that the woman was J K Rowling, and the book she wrote in the café was the first in the Harry Potter series "Harry Potter and the Philosopher's Stone." Rowling went on to be the world's first billionaire author.

Less known is the story of a young man I knew in that same city at the same time who, betrayed by his business partner and losing everything, spent his last £1000 on a plane ticket to Hong Kong. There he lived in homeless hostels and walked round in his pin-striped suit until he got a job. He now has a large recruitment firm that covers most of the Far East.

Famous again is the story of Abraham Lincoln who was born in a one-room log cabin on a farm in Kentucky, but who through self-education, rose to be a lawyer, congressman and, of course, one of the two greatest Presidents of this country.

Unknown, however, is the story of an officer in the Army I knew who had grown up on the wrong side of the tracks and, in court for a criminal offence as a young man, was offered the choice, by the judge of 12 months in prison, or going to join the Army. He chose the latter and rose through the ranks from private soldier to be the most senior Warrant Officer in the Royal Artillery before being commissioned as an officer.

This morning's gospel is one of the most beautiful and most disturbing in the bible. In the beatitudes Jesus seems to turn everything upside down. The blessed in life are not the fortunate wealthy but the unfortunate poor, not the replete but the hungry, not the happy and popular but the bereaved and reviled.

Clearly, Jesus is not saying that poverty, hunger, and loss are good things in themselves, though some Christians have voluntarily chosen poverty and hunger for themselves because of those words. No, human suffering is an evil not a good, but Jesus does seem to be saying that, in the Kingdom he preaches, those who suffer, those who experience scarcity and loss, those who experience all the various forms of emptiness in this life are in fact blessed, because they will be comforted and filled.

This is profoundly disturbing because these are the very things we all strive to avoid in life if we can. How can they be the means of blessing?

The point is underlined in Luke's account by the negatives that follow.

"But woe to you who are rich,
for you have received your consolation.

"Woe to you who are full now,
for you will be hungry.

"Woe to you who are laughing now,
for you will mourn and weep.

"Woe to you when all speak well of you,
for that is what their ancestors did to the false prophets."

Given that most of us who live around here are somewhere in the top 1 or 2% of the world's population in terms of wealth; we whose bellies are never empty except when we diet because we are overweight; we who, even if none of us escape sadness in life, know we have much more to laugh about than most; we who, mostly at least, hold the good opinion of a lot of people; we hear the accusation and it is disconcerting.

Again, Jesus, cannot be saying that, being well off, having enough to eat, having things to laugh about and having a good name are bad things in themselves. Yet, something about these things hold a danger for us, just as, so it seems, the various forms of scarcity or suffering or vulnerability hold for us the potential for blessedness.

Why?

T S Eliot in his poem East Coker in the Four Quartets reflects on this theme of emptiness and discovery.

In order to arrive at what you do not know
You must go by a way which is the way of ignorance.

In order to possess what you do not possess
You must go by the way of dispossession.

In order to arrive at what you are not
You must go through the way in which you are not.

Emptiness and suffering, however painful, are the spaces in which God can enter in and act. They are the spaces in which new life can come into being.

"In order to possess what you do not possess you must go by the way of dispossession."

J K Rowling would never have written Harry Potter had life not reduced her to scarcity and vulnerability. My friend in the Army would never have thought of joining had he not found himself in front of a judge who gave him the option of jail or service. My other friend would never have ended up where he did were he not betrayed and left with nothing. Perhaps Abraham Lincoln would never have done all he did had he been born in a comfortable wealthy home somewhere.

The researcher story teller, Dr. Brene Brown, who spoke last year at the National Cathedral, describes the ability to accept vulnerability as the key to the wholehearted life.

In the beatitudes, Jesus is pointing to the fact that, in his Kingdom, only those who experience some sort of emptiness or need, some sort of vulnerability, can be open to the new life, potential, and growth that his kingdom offers.

That is the danger for we who are rich in all the ways we can be rich. Our fullness means we think we do not need anything else. It prevents us from receiving the new life that God pours out on us. Like a glass full of water, any more that is poured in just spills out over the floor.

Now, that may not seem like the most challenging reading of this passage.

Christians in situations of great oppression and want have seen in these words a very immediate and political hope for change in their circumstances. The Liberation Theologians like Fr. Gustavo Gutiérrez Merino in South America led the way in focusing on these words and the Exodus account in the Old Testament to provide a call for social change on a wide scale.

Along with passages like the Magnificat, where Mary proclaims that the mighty will be cast down and the meek exalted, and the hungry filled while the rich shall be sent empty away, Jesus is seen, by some, to be proclaiming a revolutionary change in society. In it the poor and wretched of the earth will, in God's Kingdom, here and now, be raised up and blessed while the current elites will be cast down.

One can see how suffering Christians might hear God's voice in that way, yet Jesus showed no interest in mobilizing political power to overthrow the elites of his time. Just as he disappointed as the Jewish Messiah, because he showed no interest in leading the people of Israel to fight their Roman occupiers and in winning glory and dominion for the Jewish people, so he disappoints as a political revolutionary. If these words are straightforwardly about changing the social order we would expect him to be setting about doing that in his time on earth and does not. As we shall see shortly in Lent, in the last temptation on the mountain, he positively rejects the path of power to make the world conform to the higher standards of God's Kingdom. Yet, the fact he does not take this route might not mean that his followers should not. Many have.

In any case, I don't think this means Jesus is not a revolutionary. He absolutely is, just as he is the Messiah even though he is not the kind of Messiah that the Jews have been waiting for. His revolution goes deeper than the power structures of human beings. Social revolutions, after all, tend to replace one elite with another, and the new elites are often no better, or indeed are worse, than those they replace.

The revolution Jesus is leading is the revolution of the human heart. You and I, in all our vulnerabilities, our losses, our failures, our various forms of emptiness, can in Christ, be blessed if we allow him to turn over the painful soil of our hearts and lives with his hard words of love and, out of our brokenness bring forth the new life and growth of his Kingdom.

The reason it is a revolution is that, once we know ourselves to be in some degree poor, hungry, sad, hated, and reviled, then we can see those things in others and feel compassion for them. The Kingdom is built soul by soul, heart by heart. It does not rely on human power structures, but it does, of course, change them. From William Wiberforce leading the fight against slavery, and Martin Luther King framing his call for civil rights in terms of his faith, all the way down to people here serving in the soup kitchen or supporting our Mission Partners with their time, prayers, and money; in a million ways, Christians are building the Kingdom in their own hearts and in the world.

J K Rowling is a Christian and, apart from that being visible at times in her books, it is also seen in the fact that she did not remain a billionaire for long. She gave away very large amounts of her wealth to charity. She is still one of the richest women in the world but, she obviously understood the lesson of

today's Gospel. She poured out at least some of her fullness, perhaps because she knew what it is to be poor, but also perhaps because, as is true for all of us, to be open to God, we must keep some of the emptiness of vulnerability in us. For only then can we hope to be one the blessed of Christ's kingdom.