

THE SERMON ON THE PLAIN



When we think of the Beatitudes, we mostly recall Matthew's version at the beginning of the Sermon on the Mount (Mt 5:1-12). In Luke's Gospel, we hear another version of the Beatitude. The context for Luke's version is Jesus instructing his disciples in what is called the *Sermon on the Plain* (Lk 6:17-49).

This year we hear the *Sermon on the Plain* as our Gospel reading over three Sundays, beginning on the Sixth Sunday (13 February). It is worth noting that we only hear this challenging part of Luke's Gospel once every three years (in Year C of the Lectionary) and in some years when Lent begins in February, we often miss part of it.

Luke sets the scene just after Jesus has chosen the Twelve. As well as a large crowd of his disciples, a great multitude of the ordinary people had followed Jesus to this place.

They had come to hear Jesus and be healed by him. But it is to his disciples that Jesus directs his message. That is an important point to recall because the Beatitudes only make sense if they are heard with the ears of faith.

Matthew's Gospel has nine Beatitudes. Luke has four, followed by four corresponding Woes. The Beatitudes/Woes are presented not just as opposites but as the two sides of the one coin. It is a very stark way of saying that Jesus is turning the values of the world upside down.

Australian biblical scholar, Brendan Byrne SJ, sums it up when he writes "The Beatitudes and Woes make sense in the light of the coming reversal of fortune so prominent in Luke's view of salvation." (*The Hospitality of God* p 65). In other words, they only make sense if we are open to the gift of salvation that Jesus is offering us.

The poor and those in need are powerless. They are vulnerable. They are also blessed or fortunate because their vulnerability allows them to be more open to the gift of salvation.

Luke first introduced that gift of salvation when the angel appeared to the shepherds and declared "today a Saviour has been born for you" (Lk 2:8-11). Salvation is also the gift that Jesus offers to the criminal dying on the cross who asks "Jesus remember me when you come into your kingdom" (Lk 23:42).

Salvation is the gift of life that Jesus offers to all people. But it is a gift that needs to be received. As we will see as we follow Luke's Gospel, power and wealth are seen as obstacles that hold people back because the powerful believe that they do not need God.

In the next part of the Sermon, Jesus draws out the practical implications of this reversal of values by declaring that those who want to follow him must love their enemies and do good to those who hate and persecute them.

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