

All Saints  
6/11/2016

Mark the Evangelist

Ephesians 1:11-23

Psalm 149

Luke 6:20-31

A gospel for rich and poor

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“Blessed are you who are poor... woe to you who are rich”.

Most of us have a pretty good idea that we're not poor, and this, given the forecasts in the gospel passage, does not bode well for us. But we have a considerable interest in this and we will not go down without a fight! And so we can ask, What exactly *do* “rich” and “poor” mean? If a simple surface reading is true, then we might conclude with certainty that someone like Gina Rinehart has already received *her* consolation. And so probably also a Rupert Murdoch, and everyone else on the Rich List 200, and quite a few besides. But perhaps we imagine the fate of those who can afford to live in North Melbourne and environs may not be so clear. We know that there are those who *can't* afford to live here, or in Essendon, or in Broadmeadows, or even in any of those isolated country townships where a house goes for a song. If such people as *these* are poor, does that make *us* rich? Probably. Perhaps the poor are those who are not much motivated to pray, “Give us today our daily bread”.

The trouble such words of Jesus cause us is that we *do* see the justice which is hinted at there and yet we are not sure that the justifying or setting right they imply is not something of a threat to us.

Do we, then, have to become poor in order to protect ourselves from God, in the long run? In fact, it's not really clear what this might mean, or the way in which poverty in things might put us right before God. The word we have heard translated today as “blessed” could also be translated as “congratulations”, or even “happy”. “Congratulations to you poor, yours is the kingdom”; “Good for you, you who are hungry”; “Happy are you who weep...”

The only thing which would make it possible for us to speak of blessings in this way is the thought that all things will be set right *in the end*: “you *will* be filled; you *will* laugh; you *will* be hungry; you *will* mourn and weep”. Even though the blessing upon the poor and the woe upon the rich are cast in the present, the overwhelming sense of the passage is: “Do not worry if you are poor, hungry, grieving, down-trodden or outcast *now*; God will bless you when heaven comes.

Is this to imply that these blessings and woes – God's saving and judging work – are only *other-worldly*, that they do not relate to now, except as promises or warnings of what is coming? This would mean that we who are poor are made to wait for our blessing while we who might be rich are left in our anxious attempts to justify before God what we have.

But we should also note that there is a connection drawn between the fate of those who have and those who don't. Those who have are implicitly being held accountable for those who have not. This is not to suggest that the rich, the full and the happy are necessarily responsible for the conditions creating poverty and grief, but there is at least a link implied between the fact that they *remain* well-off while the others *remain* down-trodden.

And this brings us within range of being able to see the *present* significance of the woes and the blessings, as distinct from what they might say about our future.

If we hold in our heads the declaration of Luke's Magnificat – that God brings down the powerful from their thrones, and lifts up the lowly, fills the hungry with good things, and sends the rich away empty (Luke 1.52f) – then in fact in the blessings and woes we have another vision of God's life and work, presented now with the invitation to *share* in that work.

For our text is cut rather short at the point where it ended this morning. It runs on, however: Love your enemies...Do to others as you would have them do to you...Be merciful, just as your Father is merciful.

To put it starkly: those who "have" – in whatever sense – are invited to "play God". They are invited to see what God is doing, or promises to do, and to do the same. As a child might do in her toy kitchen what she sees her mother or father do in their real kitchen, so are we to imitate God, doing as he does, setting right, as God sets right.

To be saved is to share in the life of God. To share in the life of God is to be as God is, to do as God does – and this is precisely what God makes this possible in "saving" us. Coming to be his children – which *is* God's gift to us – brings with it the call to come to do as God does.

The real question which should arise in relation to these troubling blessings and woes is not whether we are winners or losers but whether in fact God *will* bless (or curse) in this way – or has in some sense already done it in our lives. Trying to discover whether we are the rich or the poor, or the sad or the happy, misses the point, because the blessings and woes relate not to what we are in ourselves – whether we are rich or poor and so cursed or blessed – but to what our abundance or poverty are for our relationship to each other, for our common humanity.

To be drawn into the life of God is to be propelled towards each other. Luke presents to us again and again that the Jew does not have God without an embrace of the Gentile, that the inner circle does not have God without the outcast, that the rich does not have God without the poor. *God's saving work is a reconciling work in a fatally divided world*; it is not a handing out of rewards and punishments which simply reflect or contrast with the world as it presently is. To speak of having been saved is to speak of having been commissioned to a part in that reconciling work. We may not be responsible for the world as we find it – we may not have "started the fire". But if we declare that we have known something of that setting-right which is salvation from God, we cannot but be accountable for whether or not we do anything to douse the flames.

Jesus declares the blessings and woes in order to give us an image of what God's justifying, setting-right action looks like. If we have begun a life in God, then in fact what Jesus says about who is blessed and who is not, is what *we* will have to say, for this is where our life in God will be found to have begun: in shifts between haves and have-nots, the full and the hungry, the laughing and the weeping.

These blessings and woes suggest that we are to pray that God save us from ourselves, that we might find him – and our true lives – in love and service of those who need us as much as we need God.

May that particular prayer be heard on the lips of all God's saints, and find favour in the God's ears.

Amen.

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