

“The Out Crowd” – Lk 6:17-26

It's odd how certain bible passages get associated with the silliest connections in our minds, isn't it? I've picked up a number of these over the years, many at seminary, and I can even share a few of them in public. One of those that sticks in my mind that I can share is the question “who is the shortest man in the bible?” – the answer: “Bildad, the Shuhite” – get it, “shoe height”? I said it was silly!

But one of the more serious connections is that I cannot read the sermon on the mount from the gospels without seeing in my mind that wondrous scene from the Monty Python movie, *The Life of Brian*. For those of you who are not Monty Python fans (and please, for those of you who are, please try to refrain from quoting your favourite lines out loud while I review here!) the movie *Life of Brian* is a bizarre comedy based on a lad named Brian born in Bethlehem at the same time as Jesus, and follows Brian's life in parallel with that of Jesus. The movie opens with the magi mistakenly depositing their gifts of gold, frankincense and myrrh at Brian's house, only to return shortly to grab it all back. There are many wonderful scenes in the movie that display not only a profound understanding of the Christian faith but also a deep insight into people as well. None, however, in my view can compare with the scene at the Sermon on the Mount. In a classical interpretation of our gospel passage, we see (at a distance) Jesus teaching the gathering crowds, who assemble and quietly listen in rapt absorption to his words, “blessed are the poor ...”. The scene focuses in on Brian and his wife way out at the edge of the huge crowd. Because of the distance they can't hear too well, and there's lots of loud whispering. Jesus says softly in the distance, “blessed are the peacemakers”, but at the edge of the crowd the muttering ensues ... “blessed are the cheese makers?? what's so special about them?” Others in the crowd try to hush them, and of course it all escalates, and one insults another about his wife having a big nose, and finally a brawl erupts as punches are also thrown. That for me is the defining moment, as we hear Jesus working in a calm voice through the “blessed are ...” phrases while this common brawl erupts on the edge of the crowd. What a contrast, what a powerful interpretation and understanding, what irony!

The irony is made all the more powerful, because the same contrast is represented in life between the attitudes of people and the attitude of God.

I know it sounds trite to say it, but we live in a world that worships strength, power, wealth, control and self-control. Economic success, political success and business acumen are paraded alongside and even proclaimed as the keys to social acceptance. “You too can be accepted as a somebody if only you're wealthy enough”, blare the messengers of worldly acceptance. “Blessed are the rich and powerful” is the mantra chimed out endlessly on nine hundred channels of satellite TV. “Blessed are the beautiful” is the headline plastered across the magazine racks, with the clear implication “cursed are you who do not spend all to join their ranks”.

Yet here in our text is a totally different message from Jesus. Here in Luke's abbreviated version of the familiar Sermon on the Mount we hear Jesus proclaim God's attitude as being completely opposite to that of the world (a common and often-recurring theme from Jesus!) It's not necessarily easy to understand why Jesus said what he did here, because it call for a bit of thinking. It took a long time for me to understand one of my mother's expressions, namely, “you'll soon be laughing on the other side of your

face”, but I eventually realized she was paraphrasing this message from Jesus, where he declares, “woe to you who are laughing now, for you will mourn and weep.”

Perhaps what Jesus said, and why he said it, make a bit more sense when we recognize the emphasis Luke places on the setting. While we get the unofficial title “Sermon on the Mount” from the much more familiar version in Matthew’s gospel, Luke depicts this message being delivered by Jesus after he came down off the mountain and “stood on a level place with a great crowd of his disciples and a great multitude of people from all Judea, Jerusalem, and the coast of Tyre and Sidon”. According to Luke, this was no lofty message delivered in stratospheric heights to a select crowd of social climbers. This was instead a message to the ‘out’ crowd, to the ‘average’ person (if there is such an average!), to the ordinary women and men scratching out a living, worried about their income, their kids, taxes, landlords, armies of occupation, ambitious lawyers, zealous religious authorities, thieves, muggers, disease and death. Jesus spoke to a crowd that drawn from such a wide population base would have the same characteristics of a similar crowd today. We can think of Luke’s description of the crowd as being represented today by “a great multitude of people from all the lower mainland, West Vancouver and the West End, Langley and Ladner, White Rock and Whalley, even from the Island.” The demographics of the crowd then would be similar to today, with many poor, including the working poor, some rich, and a lot in between.

But it was to the ‘out’ crowd that Jesus spoke words of reassurance. To the poor, to the hungry, to those who were weeping, to the hated, reviled and rejected, especially because of their faith, Jesus declared that their ultimate reward would be an occasion to leap for joy, as they celebrated their great reward in heaven. To the ‘in’ crowd, the rich and famous and fully-carbed who were objects of jealousy Jesus delivered a word of warning that they would receive a surprise reward, but it would be an unpleasant surprise.

Now, a HUGE word of caution is required here. There is a tremendous danger of misusing this word from Jesus, and indeed it has been so misused often in the past. This is NOT an exhortation to find a way to keep poor people poor so that they will be extra-blessed! It is NOT a justification to ignore the plight of people who go to bed hungry, thinking it’s ok since because they are last in the food line they’ll be first in the heaven line. This passage should never be used as an excuse to overlook hatred, rejection, reviling and defaming. Neither can it be legitimately used to exercise hatred and revulsion towards those who are wealthy, simply because they are rich.

What then is it about, and how do we incorporate this message? I think the answer to that is two-fold. On the one hand there is the message that God has an enormous love and compassion for the ‘out’ crowd, perhaps even a preference for them over the ‘in’ crowd, and on the other hand the true meaning of life is about how we relate to God and to each other, not how we excel in material success. This passage is truly prophetic in the sense of proclaiming to us what God sees as most important. The tone it sets is one of controversy, which should be no surprise given the rest of Jesus’ ministry. With his confrontations against the scribes and Pharisees who would abuse the people, his whip-flailing, table-overturning attacks on those who would abuse the church, his challenges to all who would listen with his familiar “you say ..., but I say ...”, Jesus proclaimed constantly that the foundational values, indeed the whole reward system of the kingdom of God are different from those of human society. Grace instead of

grabbing. Compassion over competition. Mercy, comfort, righteousness are the rewards to those who seek the kingdom of God.

“It’s not easy”, you might be thinking, and I agree with you. It’s not easy. In fact, it’s even tougher than it first appears. At first glance it would seem that we could use this text as a list of ways to behave. I believe that it was Robert Schuler from the Crystal Cathedral who did kind of a ‘cute’ thing with this text, calling it the be-attitudes, a play on the unofficial title of the section. The idea was that we are here given a list of attitudes to adopt. I have some problems with that approach, for example adopting the attitude of mourning. Oh, I’ve met some people, and I’m sure you have too, who are almost professional mourners in the faith, and who try to spread their gloom and pain to all around them, and I’m pretty sure that Jesus does not call us to adopt their attitude. Quite the contrary, he specifically exhorts us to “rejoice and be glad”.

Or how about adopting the “be-attitude” of being “poor in spirit”, or dispirited, in order to claim the kingdom of heaven – it just doesn’t seem right, and doesn’t fit the more attractive call to “rejoice and be glad”.

Well, if this text is not a list of ways to behave, what then is it? It’s an invitation, an opening, a welcome. Instead, Jesus offers to his listeners, and to us, a message of comfort and hope in a world that is not always a great place to live. Jesus called to those crowds, and calls to us today, greeting us in the conditions in which he finds us; conditions that are a result of living life. Bruised, confused, hurting, dispirited, weary, sad, tired, discouraged – these are the all-too-common rewards of life. Not that it’s all bad, or all negative, or all horrible, because much of life is great, but we all do have our scars and discouragements. We can consider ourselves rather blessed though, for many in this world have little experience other than of pain, hunger and hopelessness.

Jesus introduces his teachings with a reminder of the blessings to be received in the kingdom of God. And that’s the real blessing and miracle of grace, isn’t it? Instead of one more set of impossible hurdles blocking entrance into the kingdom, here is Jesus offering a message of encouragement, proclaiming that the broken, the weary, the heavy-laden, the mourning, the downtrodden will be lifted over any obstacle by him, the Christ. The strong, the powerful, the grasping and greedy, those who would climb over the backs of the weak or shoulder them aside have no need of, or promise of receiving a blessing from God in Christ – that blessing is particularly for those of us who need the help, the assurance and re-assurance that the kingdom of heaven is not only available but promised to us, the ‘out’ crowd.