**13th February 2022**



**Call to worship**

We are blessed to be here today.
We are blessed to be together today.
We are blessed to be a family.
We are blessed that God is with us.
Let us enjoy his blessing as we worship today.



**A gathering prayer**

Lord, thank you that we are blessed.
Help us to recognise all that you have given to us.
We pray that not only will we reflect on your blessings
we will also seek to be a blessing to others,
with your help and in your name.
**Amen.**



**A prayer of approach**

Lord God, we kneel before you with heads bowed
and hands open for your blessing,
that our minds may be infused with loving thoughts
and that we may use our words and our hands to bless others.
**Amen.**



**A prayer of adoration**

Father, we worship and adore you
for the light you bring to this dreary time of year,
when we long for spring.
Thank you for the blessing of every shoot and bud,
the reminders of your presence
and your ever-circling, ever-giving love.
**Amen.**



**A prayer of confession and an Assurance of forgiveness**

**A prayer of confession**

Lord, we confess that curses come to our lips more readily than blessings. Our thoughts are critical rather than looking for the good. We condemn others and turn away before we think what we might do to turn things around and draw blessings from a situation.

So, Lord, we ask for your forgiveness, and we turn to you for a blessing of light upon the dark confines of our thinking. Bless us with your way of seeing, so that our lives might be a blessing to others. **Amen.**

**Assurance of forgiveness**

Sometimes our mindset has been so misguided, and for so long, we fail to see how you can forgive us. Mired in dark thoughts that hastily curse and rarely bless, we are ashamed when a ray of holy light reveals the dust and ashes of our lives.

Yet with you, Lord, there is forgiveness and redemption, the chance to turn our thoughts around, and bless with the blessings that come from you. Thank you, Lord. **Amen.**

**Luke 6.17-26**

**Nadia Bolz Weber:**

**Maybe the Sermon on the Mount is all about Jesus’ lavish blessing of the people around him on that hillside who his world—like ours—didn’t seem to have much time for: people in pain, people who work for peace instead of profit, people who exercise mercy instead of vengeance.**

**Maybe Jesus was simply blessing the ones around him that day who didn’t otherwise receive blessing, who had come to believe that, for them, blessings would never be in the cards. I mean, come on, doesn’t that just *sound*like something Jesus would do? Extravagantly throwing around blessings as though they grew on trees?**

**So I imagine Jesus standing among us offering some new beatitudes:**

***Blessed are the agnostics.***

***Blessed are they who doubt. Those who aren’t sure, who can still be surprised.***

***Blessed are they who are spiritually impoverished and therefore not so certain about everything that they no longer take in new information.***

***Blessed are those who have nothing to offer. Blessed are the preschoolers who cut in line at communion. Blessed are the poor in spirit. You are of heaven and Jesus blesses you.***

***Blessed are they for whom death is not an abstraction.***

***Blessed are they who have buried their loved ones, for whom tears could fill an ocean. Blessed are they who have loved enough to know what loss feels like.***

***Blessed are the mothers of the miscarried.***

***Blessed are they who don’t have the luxury of taking things for granted anymore.***

***Blessed are they who can’t fall apart because they have to keep it together for everyone else.***

***Blessed are those who “still aren’t over it yet.”***

***Blessed are those who mourn. You are of heaven and Jesus blesses you.***

***Blessed are those who no one else notices. The kids who sit alone at middle-school lunch tables. The laundry guys at the hospital. The sex workers and the night-shift street sweepers.***

***Blessed are the forgotten. Blessed are the closeted.***

***Blessed are the unemployed, the unimpressive, the underrepresented.***

***Blessed are the teens who have to figure out ways to hide the new cuts on their arms. Blessed are the meek.***

***You are of heaven and Jesus blesses you.***

***Blessed are the wrongly accused, the ones who never catch a break, the ones for whom life is hard, for Jesus chose to surround himself with people like them.***

***Blessed are those without documentation. Blessed are the ones without lobbyists.***

***Blessed are foster kids and special-ed kids and every other kid who just wants to feel safe and loved.***

***Blessed are those who make terrible business decisions for the sake of people.***

***Blessed are the burned-out social workers and the overworked teachers and the pro bono case takers.***

***Blessed are the kindhearted football players and the fundraising trophy wives.***

***Blessed are the kids who step between the bullies and the weak. Blessed are they who hear that they are forgiven.***

***Blessed is everyone who has ever forgiven me when I didn’t deserve it.***

***Blessed are the merciful, for they totally get it.***

**I imagine Jesus standing here blessing us all because I believe that is our Lord’s nature. Because, after all, it was Jesus who had all the powers of the universe at his disposal but did not consider his equality with God something to be exploited. Instead, he came to us in the most vulnerable of ways, as a powerless, flesh-and-blood newborn. As if to say, “You may hate your bodies, but I am blessing all human flesh. You may admire strength and might, but I am blessing all human weakness. You may seek power, but I am blessing all human vulnerability.” This Jesus whom we follow cried at the tomb of his friend and turned the other cheek and forgave those who hung him on a cross. Because he *was*God’s Beatitude—God’s blessing to the weak in a world that admires only the strong.**

**God bless you.**

**-Nadia Bolz-Weber**

<https://thecorners.substack.com/p/blessed-are-the-agnostics>

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ctcjNCrGyT8>

**Sermon**

I was reading the other day about the boom in anti Valentine’s Day gifts. You can get a card that reads ‘Happy unimaginative, consumerist and entirely arbitrary, manipulative and shallow interpretation of romance day.

Best of luck giving that to your loved one!

This week, many will celebrate Valentine’s Day with cards, chocolates, teddies, and roses. Becky May writes: Retailers tell us ‘You’re blessed when you receive a large box of chocolates or the largest teddy on the shelf.’ TV and film narratives tell us ‘You’re blessed when your mailbag is full of oversized cards from admirers.’ In other words, you’re blessed when you get, get, get.

Jesus came with news of a topsy-turvy kingdom whose message is as jarring and unsettling today, as it was to those who first heard it.

In it Jesus says ‘You’re blessed when you have not, get not, go without.’ His kingdom message is ‘You’re being blessed when you’re in the place of not, because here God is with you, and is everything.’

The story our contemporary world holds to is a story about individual choice, to be who you want to be, success and achievement and about loyalty to self and confidence in technological progress. It’s a very alluring story. It seduces us constantly with the idea that here is the road to fulfillment, to happiness, to security. The media, advertising and movies reinforce it. We can easily get the sense that there are huge forces driving this story, forces that are way beyond our control, and our ability to influence; forces of advertising, large business, capitalism, globalization and a political culture all of which Christianity should be a dissonant voice. Because we shouldn’t stand for those values.

We can bemoan the decline of the church in our society and feel failures. But we are also the victims of these huge forces which I would argue are antagonistic towards belonging to church.

Churches will never be cool. They should not be places where it looks good on Instagram, or helps you feel part of the in-crowd. Churches are not aspirational and help you succeed and achieve. Far from it. Jesus came for the losers in life not the winners.

In Jesus day, as arguably in ours, those who had wealth and health were seen to be the winners. those who were blessed. In Jesus day, and maybe in ours, those who were poor or ill were seen to get what they deserved, or were in some sense sinners, or cursed by God. There was a twin track world of those who were ‘in’ and those who were ‘out,’ the ‘haves’ and the ‘have nots’, ‘the righteous’ and the ‘unrighteous’. Sound familiar?

Jesus gets up to give a sermon and looks out on a crowd gathered before him: the sermon on the plain here in Luke, the Sermon on the Mount in Matthews gospel - and he looks out at ordinary people gathered before him – the disenfranchised, the oppressed, the excluded, the sick and despised. and he knew that things had to change. The kingdom of God is coming.

So, he makes these extraordinary statements and he basically looks people in the eye as he announces, ‘God’s kingdom belongs to you!’.

He wasn’t’ suggesting, as the church has so often taught, that to work yourself into one of these conditions somehow makes you better off in the eyes of God. He wasn’t saying ‘Get poor! Start mourning now! If you want to know God’s blessing!’ They weren’t some kind of spiritual health test or list for the extra zealous and competitive pious followers. That would be to reduce them all to another dose of salvation by works or at the very least by attitude. That would be back breaking soul-destroying bad news.

So why are people in these categories blessed?

The answer is simple: they were blessed because of God’s generosity. God comes to them not because of their condition but in spite of it.

The beatitudes form a list of the categories of those who knew what it was like to be shunned by establishment. They were the spiritually destitute not the spiritually capable. For them Jesus’ message was a revolution in the truest sense of the word – from now on, those last would be counted as first ahead of those who were far too certain of their righteousness and privilege.

That message runs through the whole of gospels. Writ large and bold.

Jesus uses the word for blessed nine times at the start of the Sermon on the Mount, four times here in Luke’s version: known as the Sermon on the Plain. The word in Greek is makarioi. There are many words in Greek for happiness. When Aristotle the great philosopher began his work on ethics by saying that all men aim at happiness, the word he used was eudainmonia – a different word. The difference is made clear because the word for happiness in the gospel is translated in most versions of the Bible as Blessed. The word suggests that people are blessed by God. They are protected and strengthened by God; they are healed and made whole by God; their lives are made fruitful; and happy by God. The happiness Jesus talks about is a happiness given by God.

What Jesus teaches is that there is only one sort of happiness that is true, lasting, and indestructible. Of course, there are many things that people enjoy, which brings them pleasure. But blessedness is something deeper than enjoyment. It arises from a very deep sense of security, from the sense that one is living and not just filling in the time.

That security is based on the relationship to God, who has created us and created us to share in a relationship of love. God is our destination – the greatest gift is eternal life that is when our joy will be complete. But that relationship starts now.

“Blessed are you who are poor,
    for yours is the kingdom of God.
**21**Blessed are you who hunger now,
    for you will be satisfied.
Blessed are you who weep now,
    for you will laugh.
**22**Blessed are you when people hate you,
    when they exclude you and insult you
    and reject your name as evil,
        because of the Son of Man.

Matthews Beatitudes say blessed are the poor in spirit. Let’s not get hung up on the difference. The first reader of the gospel wouldn’t have been troubled by such confusion. For first century Jews, the term poor, was never limited to financial poverty. Rather it could and did indicate social, spiritual, physical political as well as financial exclusion.

Jesus was basically saying, especially in contrast to the woes in the second part of this sermon, that ‘you may think your position in society is secure. you may believe that God is on your side and that your privilege proves this as well as justifying your claim that the poor are sinners. But I’m here to tell you - you’re wrong. The good news of the Kingdom of God is his peace belongs to those you have excluded and despised. Your time is up: their time has arrived.

It was a radical sermon.

I keep reminding you there are many reasons why Jesus got himself crucified.

Blessed are the poor, blessed are those who mourn, blessed are the meek. In our world most people think that happiness consists of success, wealth, long life, victory in battle. Jesus offers wonderful news and happiness for the humble, the poor, the mourners, the peacemakers. God is acting in and through Jesus to turn the world upside down, to pour out blessings on all who now turn to him and accept the new thing that he is doing.

Blessed are the poor is about a humbleness to one’s own failings and the need for God’s grace to lift you up. It’s not a mandate to accept poverty and do nothing to make the world a more just and equal place.

Blessed are you who weep now for you will laugh. Sometimes I read out these words as I walk down the aisle of the church leading a coffin at the start of a funeral. Blessed are they who mourn for they will be comforted. Some funerals there is great grief and people are inconsolable. In reality, for a variety of reasons sometimes those who mourn are not comforted.

This week we had the sentencing of Harley Demmon who at the age of only 15 stabbed and killed Josh Hall last April in Cam Sports ground. The crime was motivated by a feud on social media. The judge said they were teenagers in Gloucestershire but spoke in the patois of urban gangsters. You intended to be fearless when in fact you were insecure. You adopted the personas of hardened criminals. Perceived slights to honour and status were met by promises of violence. Reminders of evil influences in our society,

Josh’s mother said her world has fallen apart. And she could never forgive Harley Damon for the actions he took.

We can only pray for God’s comfort and strength for her to find the freedom for forgiveness in this desperate situation and not to drink the poison of unforgiveness, and for Harley to find true repentance and a better life.

At funerals I will go on to give the promise of Jesus ‘ I am the resurrection and the life, those who believe in me will live even though they die’ and maybe that comfort will only be complete in heaven but that’s a hope worth hanging on for.

The type of mourning Jesus is referring to here is not just about grief but recognising our own desperate spiritual poverty and that of the state of the world.

Asking someone ‘are you happy’ ‘do you feel blessed?’ can be deeply threatening.

We have a multi-billion-pound advertising and marketing industry designed to make you feel not happy with your life unless you buy the latest phone, or the newest model of car, or change your house, your career, your partner.

It is becoming obvious that whilst strength, good looks, right connections, competitive instinct all may bring success in our world these are the very qualities that may block our entrance into the kingdom of God. Dependence, sorrow, repentance, longing to change, humility all open the gates to the kingdom of heaven are the oxygen of vital faith.

Humans beings do not readily admit their desperation. But when they do, the kingdom of heaven draws near.

For some the question has never been ‘Do I believe in god?’ so much as ‘does God believe in me?’ And Jesus answer is an affirming and reassuring ‘Yes’ – so redefining all the social and religious assumptions of his day and ours. God accepts us as we are, without judgement or condemnation and gradually through God’s love draws us ever closer to understanding and living out his peace and values in our lives. In other words acceptance precedes repentance - a change of life and values – not the other way round.

21 years ago, I became the minster of this church and in my forts week as minster I was invited to attend the Open-door club on Tuesday night. There were some of our church members there, Charles and jean Jukes, Joan Kingham, Gladys Marriot, Mat and Shirley Welsh, sylvia Woods and over 40 other adults who had learning disabilities. But it was a fun atmosphere of acceptance and care. Since then, the Open-door Christmas Carol Service is one of my most favourite services in the year. We just enjoy worship together without any agendas or any feeling of fear of missing out on a better cooler Christmas event.

I thought then that this church understands a bit about the kingdom of God. Acceptance for all. We seek to be inclusive because God is inclusive. Sometimes we get it wrong, which is why I prefer to speak of ‘seeking to be inclusive’ rather than the more pompous ‘we are inclusive’.

The door of acceptance is flung wide open. However, be prepared to change if you really want to enjoy the benefits of being in God’s community. Jesus lowers the doorstep to allow you to get in. but he also lowers the mantle at the top of the doorframe so that anyone who wanted to enter has to stoop in order to get in.

Some will regard the church as uncool, full of misfits and people they don’t want to associate with. They won’t get it.

For those of us humble enough to have been changed by Jesus, may we know we are blessed and seek to bless others.

References:

Steve Chalke: The Lost Message of Jesus Zondervan 2003



**A prayer of praise and thanksgiving**

Lord, we thank and praise you
for all the many blessings in our lives.
For food and shelter, for family and friends,
for the measure of health we have,
and the many comforts we take for granted.
Thank you also for your plain speaking;
these blessings are not merited by anything we have done,
just as the problems of many – of those who hunger,
and are homeless, and sick – are also undeserved.
So, Lord, in giving our heartfelt thanks,
we ask that we might be a blessing to those
whom the worldly-wise often curse.
**Amen.**



**Prayers of intercession**

Lord God, we pray for an end to all racism and injustice
throughout society, at home and abroad.
We pray for those ostracised, hated and rejected
Because of race. Because of faith.
Because of their opinions and way of life.

Lord God who loves to bless:
**hear our prayer.**

**Move hearts. Bring justice and joy to the suffering.**

We pray for the hungry throughout the world.
The people of Yemen where malnutrition is rife.
Those parents so desperate they’re selling their organs
in exchange for money to feed their families.
We pray for those struggling to in our own country,
in our own communities.
Those having to rely on food banks.
Those too proud to seek help.

Lord God who loves to bless:
**hear our prayer.**

**Bring sustenance to the hungry. Provide for all needs.**

We pray for all who are in need of your hand at this time.
Those in hospital.
And all caught up in the NHS backlog of appointments and operations.
Those mourning loved ones.
Those in abusive relationships, deprived of love by those around them.

Lord God who loves to bless:
**hear our prayer.**

**Heal all pain. Bring love and laughter.**

We pray for all who govern and guide.
For the government today.
Help politicians unite to lead us forward
through the economic and health consequences of the pandemic.
For the church: may it stand firm on your kingdom values;
serving as you would serve.

Lord God who loves to bless: **hear our prayer.**

**Bless all who govern and guide with your wisdom and truth.**

May the power of your blessings be with us all as we live in you,
bearing abundant fruit with which to bless others in your holy name.
**Amen.**



**A prayer of blessing**

*You could use the first phrase alone as A prayer for all ages together.*

Lord, thank you for the many blessings we have recognised today.
Forgive us for the times that we are too busy to notice all that you pour upon us.
We pray for blessing on our church, the community as a whole and every precious individual member – bless us with your wisdom and understanding.
We pray for blessing on our local community – help us to be a source of blessing; help us to recognise ways that we can show and share your love. We know there are often barriers. When we are the barrier – perhaps through our fears, our worries, even our greed – give us the strength to overcome, that your blessing may overflow to all around us. **Amen.**



**A sending out prayer**

Lord, as we step into this week,
help us to cultivate our relationship with you.
We want to be rooted in you.
Show us our barriers to receiving your blessing.
Help us not only to recognise how blessed we are,
but also show us ways that your blessing
can overflow to others through us.
**Amen.**