

Epiphany 6 / February 13, 2022

Luke 6:20;24

“And He lifted up His eyes on His disciples and said, ‘Blessed are you who are poor for yours is the kingdom of God...But woe to you who are rich for you have received your consolation.’”

Our gospel is commonly known as “The Sermon on the Plain” and is similar in form and content to “The Sermon on the Mount,” recorded in the gospel of Matthew. One major difference is that it contains four blessings countered balanced with four woes. Jesus says, blessed are the poor, the hungry, those who weep and those who are excluded because of Him. Woe is pronounced upon the rich, the full, those who laugh and those who are well spoken of by the world. Like the Sermon on the Mount, the Sermon on the Plain concludes with Jesus encouraging His hearers to listen to His words, take them to heart and build upon them, as the sure foundation to withstand the storms of life. On the other hand, those who disregard His words and reject them are building on ground without a foundation and are doomed to destruction.

How rich are you? In our text Jesus contrasts the poor and the rich. The poor are blessed, for theirs is the kingdom of God. The rich are warned that they have received their consolation now. The contrast between the rich and the poor is a major theme in Luke’s gospel and key to understanding Jesus’ mission and ministry. In chapter one, Mary the mother of our Lord sings, “He has filled the hungry with good things, and the rich He has sent away empty.”

In Jesus’ parable of “The rich man and Lazarus,” poor Lazarus begs for sustenance outside the rich man’s home. Both men die. Lazarus is comforted by Father Abraham. The rich man is tormented in hades. When the rich man complains, he is told “You in your lifetime received your good things and Lazarus in like manner bad things; but now he is comforted here and you are in anguish.” Perhaps the question is: not how rich we are but, “are we poor enough to enter the kingdom of God?”

In fact, it is the central question, because only the poor enter the kingdom of God. Who are the poor? God’s concern is not with worldly wealth, He owns the universe! In Psalm 50 the Lord says, “If I were hungry, I would not tell you, for the world and its fulness are mine.” The poor of whom Mary sang and Jesus speaks, are the poor in spirit. Who are the poor in spirit? We are the poor in spirit, whether we recognize it or not. We are all poor in our relationship with God. Sin impoverishes our spirits whether we are rich or poor in the wealth of the world. God is the Righteous One. We are unrighteous because of our sin. No matter what our physical circumstances, we need God to enrich us with His righteousness in the forgiveness of our sin. What is essential in the eyes of God is that we recognize our poverty, and confess our sin saying with Isaiah, “we have all become like one who is unclean and all our righteous acts are like filthy rags.” Whether we consider ourselves rich or poor in the wealth of the world, we all must come to God to receive the wealth of His grace, in the riches of forgiveness for the sake of Christ our Saviour. Though He was rich, for our sakes He became poor that in Him we would receive the riches of forgiveness, the wealth of a good relationship with God and the treasure of eternal life in His kingdom.

Do you consider yourself rich or poor? Richness and poverty are to some extent, relative terms. A simple millionaire seems poor in comparison to a billionaire. Compared with some places in the world, almost everyone in Canada seems rich. In some places almost everyone is poor, many desperately poor to the point of facing starvation daily. Does that mean that in God’s eyes they are more blessed than their wealthy neighbours who are fed and sheltered? They probably wouldn’t think so.

Poverty in the world is a fact of life, caused not by God’s design, but by human sin. When Israel prepared to enter the Promised Land, the Lord said there would be no poor people among them, if they followed the terms of the covenant and loved Him with their whole heart and loved their neighbours as themselves. In Deuteronomy 15 the Lord said, “But there will be no poor among you; for the Lord will bless you in the land the Lord is giving you...if only you will strictly obey the voice of the Lord your God, being careful to do all this commandment that I command you today.” Well aware of human nature, He also commanded them to leave some of the harvest in fields, so that the poor of the land had something to gather and would not starve. The problem was not a lack of material resources, the problem was human sin.

Human sin is still the problem, the Lord provides more than enough for everyone to be fed and sheltered. Millions go hungry and food is destroyed. There is no special dignity in being rich or poor in material blessings. The true dignity of humans is that we were made in the likeness of God, as the psalmist sang, “a little lower than the heavenly beings.” Poverty and every evil in the world are caused by human sin. This poverty mars the image in which we were created, separates us from our Creator and from each other. This spiritual poverty expresses

itself in greed, envy, pride, hatred, immorality and idolatry. It expresses itself in everyone's life, whether we are rich or poor in our eyes or in the eyes of others.

The rich may make wealth their god and use it to subjugate the poor, but the poor can just as easily and readily despise God as the rich; both can make material wealth their god. In the book of Proverbs, Agur the son of Jakeh prayed, "give me neither poverty or riches; feed me with the food that is needful for me, lest I be full and deny you...or poor and steal and profane the name of my God." Whether we are rich or poor in material benefits, we are loved by God. Whether we are wealthy in the things of the world or not, we are all in need of the wealth of God's grace in Christ Jesus to enrich our spirits and bring us into relationship with Him. He is the true source of our life in time and for eternity.

How rich are you? One of the major banks has an advertising campaign that begins with the statement, "You are richer than you think." In Christ, we really are richer than we think. The wealth of this world is only good in time. The wealth of this world is only good if the times are good. If the economy collapses or the stock market crashes, we can go from riches to rags in a day. Run away inflation can make a billionaire a millionaire and turn a millionaire into a beggar. After the First World War, printed money in Germany was worth less than printed wall paper.

We need money to be fed and sheltered in our world, but whether we are rich or poor, the love of money is a root of all kinds of evil as St. Paul told Timothy. The love of money can even cause people to lose their faith in God, who truly enriches us body and spirit. A popular political theology in the late 20th century spoke of God's "preferential option for the poor," as if God had a special love for the poor and even a hatred of the rich. God does have a preferential love for the poor in spirit, whether we are rich or poor in terms of worldly wealth. His option was to give Jesus to pay our debt of sin, not with silver or gold, but with His own precious blood. In Christ, you are wealthier than you realize. You will only truly realize it in eternity.

The world is richer than it thinks. Jesus paid the debt for the sin of the whole world. He offers the riches of forgiveness, the wealth of relationship with God and the treasure of eternal life, for every soul to receive. Believe it! Jesus shared our poverty and experienced the woe that is caused by human sin. He paid the debt that none of us and no one could pay, by sacrificing His life on the cross for our salvation. This wealth is offered for all and given freely and abundantly to all who believe.

We receive this wealth in the promise of our baptism, in the forgiveness of our sins. We receive it in the Lord's body and blood, given and shed for the forgiveness of our sins. We receive the riches of His grace as often as we remember the gospel, "For God so loved the world that He gave His only begotten Son that whoever believes in Him would not perish but have eternal life." This wealth is yours and mine. Believe it and share it with people you know and with people you meet. In Jesus' Name. Amen