

A Level Playing Field

(Luke 6:17-26 – Preached by Cheryl Williams at Footscray Baptist Church on February 13th, 2022)

We Australians like to think we live in an egalitarian society, a society based on fairness, that there is a level playing field for all.

In reality though, we know that is far from true. We know

- the gap between rich and poor continues to widen
- that health outcomes vary often dependent on what money you have or where you live
- that young people can't really get into the housing market
- that getting a visa is often dependant on who you know rather than a fair examination of your circumstances
- that success even in our sporting teams is often dependant on how much you can afford to pay for your playing list
- during Covid some areas got significant help and others like the arts and hospitality didn't, some have had access to one, two or three doses as others in the world have received none
- celebrities seem to get an open door that we mere mortals don't.

Need I go on.

Jesus in our reading today has something to say to us.

Jesus has come down from the mountain, healing and liberating people on the way and is now talking to his disciples with others including us listening in.

He has come down to the plain and speaks plainly. He speaks of four blessings and four corresponding woes. We refer to these as the beatitudes and they occur in Matthew's gospel as well. These blessings and woes are provocative, outrageous and even appear foolish – should that surprise us with Jesus?

Blessed are the poor, the hungry, the sad and persecuted and woe to the rich, the full, those who laugh and are well respected.

These blessings and woes are a reminder of vulnerability.

Often, we have wondered if this means the economically poor and rich or if it is referring to spiritual poverty. This is mainly because Matthew speaks about the poor in spirit. However, we need to look at what and why Luke simply says the poor. We also need to make sense of something that at first glance doesn't make sense – how indeed are the poor, the hungry, the sad, the persecuted blessed?

First, I don't think Jesus is endorsing poverty, hunger, sadness or persecution.

These blessings and woes capture the hopes for the coming reign of God, a vision that we have already encountered in Luke's gospel. Mary sings of a day her community hoped for, a day when the hungry would be filled, the rich deposed, the humble lifted

high. Jesus himself has announced he has come to proclaim good news to the poor. It is this vision that we are called to participate in, in the now, not in some future utopia. I had a Persian friend who used to explain his understanding of Jesus as making a level playing field. When reflecting on how Jesus washed his friends feet, how the teacher humbled himself before the students he would say some are brought up to a level and others brought down to the same level, so all are equal.

Second, to spiritualise these blessings is to ignore our responsibilities and even the reality of life into which God's reign comes. Luke is describing poverty in all its guises – economic, emotional and spiritual. He is describing real hunger felt by many in the world as well as those who hunger for justice.

Thirdly, it is about having a real playing field. No one needs to look up to others or should look down on others. We need to rid ourselves of our unconscious biases and instead stand shoulder to shoulder, looking each other in the eye, looking around, in front of us and behind us. The blessings envisioned are envisioned for all, not just us believers, but all who need such blessing.

Fourthly, these blessings are for the now. We are a community that has been taught to pray 'thy kingdom come', a community that believes that the reality of God's reign is as much for the present as it is for 'heaven' -whenever or wherever that may be. The reign of God is about compassion now.

Finally, Jesus shows us how to make this vision of Gods reign a reality. He will go on to talk about how we should share what we have (if you have two coats give one to someone who needs it), to turn the other cheek when people hurt you, to forgive, to love our enemies, to be a good Samaritan to others in need, to walk the extra mile.

Deep down we know that true happiness doesn't come from money, fame or fortune.

We also know that because of Jesus, his life, his death and his resurrection that God's reign has come to earth right now. Let's live into it, lets walk together side by side, hand in hand and do all we can to make sure life is a level playing field for all. Then we will know ourselves to be blessed. Amen.