

Hespeler, 17 February 2019 © Scott McAndless
Jeremiah 17:5-10, Psalm 1:1-6, 1 Corinthians 15:12-20, Luke 6:17-26
(From the high pulpit)

The blessed evangelist, Saint Matthew, has to us written that on a particular occasion, our blessed Lord Jesus Christ did go up into a high mountain and, when he was set, his disciples came even unto him and he looked upon them and opened his mouth and he spoke some of the most enduring words of all history:

“How blessed are those who are poor in spirit for the kingdom of heaven belongs to them. How blessed are they that mourn: for they shall be comforted and the meek: for they shall inherit the earth. How blessed are they which do hunger and thirst after righteousness: for they shall be filled.”

And you know those words; they are justly famous. What’s more, how perfectly apt it is that they should have been spoken from a mountaintop – you might even call it a Sermon on the Mount. After all, have mountaintops not always been seen as unique places – as places where heaven is both literally and figuratively near. Almost all ancient peoples, including the people of Israel, imagined the dwelling places of their gods on top of mountains: Olympus, Machu Picchu or Mount Sinai.

Even more important, mountains are places that are separated from the mundane of this world, literally raised above our everyday concerns. How fitting, then, to have such a soaring sermon preached from a mountaintop, for these words of Jesus also seem to take us out of everyday concerns and encourage us to think only of heavenly things. The poor in spirit inheriting the kingdom of God; those hungering and thirsting after righteousness being filled! I don’t know about you, but, for me, when I meditate on those words, I’m not always sure what exactly they mean but they do give me a shiver and they lift me up and place me above all of the troubles and struggles that so often weigh me down in this world.

So it really matters that those words were spoken on the top of a mountain. But how did the gospel writer know that that was where Jesus said all of those incredible words? Was he there? Was he listening and did he remember the setting? Well, probably not. Remember that we don’t know who wrote the Gospel of Matthew; it was written anonymously, and it was only church tradition that later decided that it must have been written by the Apostle Matthew. But most scholars who have looked at it have concluded that it wasn’t written by an eyewitness. It was written by somebody who had taken sources, likely



written sources that had been circulating in the church, and compiled them into his own account of the life of Jesus.

And those written sources had the words that Jesus had spoken, but they did not have the setting. The author of this gospel decided that Jesus must have said them on the mountain, probably because he saw Jesus as a new Moses bringing down a new law from God on a mountaintop. But that mountaintop setting influenced the way the gospel writer heard those words.

(From the congregation)

How do I know that? Because there was somebody else who imagined those words being spoken in a rather different setting and, in that other setting, they sounded a bit different. The Gospel of Luke had those same words of Jesus, but when Luke (whoever he was because, of course, that gospel was also written anonymously) tells us (and tells us accurately) what Jesus said, he says they were spoken on a level place. And here is where we can see the wonderful power of Jesus' teachings because those words that were so soaring and uplifting on the mountaintop are still just as powerful down on the level place, but their power definitely strikes you in a very different way.

What did Jesus say down on that level place? He turned his eyes, not heavenward, but clearly towards the eyes of the people who stood around him and he said, "**Blessed are you who are poor, for yours is the kingdom of God.**" It is no longer, "*those who are poor,*" because Jesus is obviously very aware that the poor ones that he is concerned with are the poor ones who are standing right there in front of him as he looks them in the eyes with compassion and love.

Nor, on the level place, does Jesus say, "*poor in spirit.*" Sure, I think that what he says is meant to include those who have embraced poverty of spirit – who have are not merely financially poor but have given thought to the deeper spiritual meaning of the poverty that exists in this world. But down here on the level place, poverty isn't just a spiritual concept or idea. It is a hard reality. In fact, the word that Jesus uses there, the word that is translated as poor, goes a little bit farther than what we would normally consider to be poverty. A more accurate translation would probably be something like, blessed are you who are destitute, you who are totally without resource. Down here on the level place, you cannot escape the worst realities of human existence.

And so it goes with all of the other sayings of Jesus down on the level place. Up on top of the mountain, it was blessed are those who hunger and thirst *for righteousness*. And blessed indeed are such people – where would we be if we didn't have those who pursued what is right at all cost. But down on the level place, Jesus simply looks into people's eyes and he says blessed are you who are hungry, just plain hungry, because that is what

people are struggling with down on the level place of our world right now. And again, I want to state clearly that I don't think that one of these gospel writers got Jesus' words right and the other one got it wrong. What Jesus said encompassed both of these meanings. It's just that the different meanings come out based on whether you're up on the mountaintop or down on the level place.

There is something else that is significantly different about Luke's account of what Jesus said on the level place. Jesus started with the blessings, just as we hear up on the mountaintop, but on the level place he doesn't stop there. On the level place, after Jesus blesses and congratulates and tells how fortunate are those people that everyone else has long concluded are the most miserable people on the face of the Earth – the poor, the hungry, the weeping and the persecuted – Jesus goes on from there. And he turns to those people that everyone else considers to be fortunate and blessed. I don't imagine there were too many of them, but Jesus turned and he looked straight into the eyes of the fat and well-dressed people in the crowd and he said, **“But woe to you who are rich, for you have received your consolation. Woe to you who are full now, for you will be hungry. Woe to you who are laughing now, for you will mourn and weep. Woe to you when all speak well of you.”**

And I have no doubt, by the way, that Jesus did exactly that. That he had the audacity to look the prosperous people right in the eye and tell them that they were cursed. It fits perfectly well with everything that he has said up until that point. Even with the version of what he said on the mountaintop, it makes sense that he would have gone on in the same way. This was exactly how the ancient prophets spoke. We have the pattern laid out for us in our reading from the Old Testament this morning. First you give the blessings, but you are not done until you have also given the curses. People would have expected Jesus to do as much.

But, you see, when you're up on the mountaintop and when you're detached from the realities of this world, I guess it's just easier to forget about the curses and to focus only on the blessings. It seems right to do so, and I think that Matthew is right to do so. But down on the level place, you simply cannot ignore the reality that inequality and poverty are not just the problems of the poor – they belong to all of us and we all have our part to play in solving them. So, yes, Jesus did speak boldly to the rich and well fed – far more boldly and harshly than I know I would ever dare to. But maybe that is why he is Jesus and I am not.

So it is a wonderful and beautiful thing that we have here in these two gospels, Matthew and Luke: two very different accounts of the same sermon that Jesus gave. They are remarkable in how the two versions are similar, but also quite remarkable in how they are different. And down through the centuries, the church has had to deal with the fact that we have two different

versions of this same sermon that Jesus gave. Usually the way that we have dealt with that is by choosing one version and putting it over the other. We have chosen one of the two sermons and decided that it was the correct one, the superior version. And usually, by the way, it is the one that was preached on the mountaintop that wins out. There's a reason why everyone has heard of The Sermon on the Mount but no one has heard of the sermon on the level place. And I get why The Sermon on the Mount wins. It is beautiful and it is true and absolutely it is what Jesus meant to say. But I think it is important to recognize that it is not *all* that Jesus meant to say.

Sometimes, by the way, you will hear people put it the other way around. They will say that what Jesus actually said was basically what you will find in the sermon on the level place in the Gospel of Luke and that Matthew got a hold of it and *spiritualized* the sermon by adding words like "poor *in spirit*" and "hunger and thirst *for righteousness*," to make the actual words of Jesus a little bit less offensive to rich people who might read his gospel. There is something to that, but I don't think that is quite right either. The fact of the matter is that we have been given both versions in both of the gospels and we have to assume that we were given them both for a reason. It is only by struggling with both versions of what Jesus said that we will come to terms with what Jesus' message was all about.

The temptation throughout Christian history, however, has been to want to safely confine those radical words of Jesus to the mountaintop. They seem safer up there. They are more at a distance from the real struggles that people sometimes go through in this life. But, while I will always defend the words heard on the mountaintop as the true message of Jesus, I don't think they are ever going to be complete on their own. For how can we understand what it means to be poor in spirit if we do not grapple with the real problems of poverty that real people struggle with down in the level place. A Christianity and a Christian message that is only confined to the mountaintop, that is only concerned with heavenly things without getting messed up with the real misery of people's lives, is never going to be enough.

And I believe that the real mission of the church today is in fact to bring the message of Jesus down from the mountaintop and into the level place. It is wonderful to have a message that lifts us up to mountaintops – that makes our spirits soar above the mundane concerns of this world. We need that. But there is also a great need for a gospel that addresses people where they are. If you do not have a gospel that is good news for the actual poor, the truly hungry, the deeply oppressed and sorrowful – and even better, that offers criticism to the oppressive rich and the people who are consuming the best that this world has to the detriment of others – then is that gospel truly a gospel? The gospel we need must speak to both and challenge us to aspire to both. We need to hear Jesus on the mountaintop but also on the level place.