

3<sup>rd</sup> Sunday before Lent (Gospel: Luke 6:17-26)

### **Wednesday's Child**

Here we are, in the flatlands of February. It's the shortest month of the year, but it can feel interminable. Christmas is over; the thrill of the new year has faded; and the weather is – let's face it – changeable in the best of times. Perhaps, like me, you began 2019 with a list of virtuous resolutions, only to find that you can barely remember them now. (And if you *are* one of those excellent people who are still going strong: Well, good for you.) But if you find these February days hard going, you're not alone.

It can be easy to read this lack of enthusiasm into the church calendar, as well. That thrilling run of festivals has finished. Advent, Christmas, Epiphany, Candlemas: They've all come and gone. Jesus has now been born, baptised, circumcised, and Easter is a long way off. Instead, we find ourselves in 'Ordinary Time' – that funny sliver of weeks before Lent begins.

Even our gospel reading today is flat. Literally. As we heard, 'Jesus came down with [his disciples] and stood on a level place.' For this reason, the passage that follows kicks off what is widely known as 'The Sermon on the Plain.' It's a marked contrast to its counterpart in Matthew's version, the far more enticingly titled 'Sermon on the Mount,' in which Jesus climbs a mountain with his followers, offering them – and us – a stunning view of the Sea of Galilee. In Matthew's version, Jesus then launches into the 'The Beatitudes' – one of the most beautiful and famous passages in the Christian bible.

Luke's version, which we have just heard, contains just four of Matthew's nine Beatitudes:

'Blessed are you who are poor ... You who are hungry ... You who weep ...  
Blessed are you when people hate you, on account of the Son of Man.'

But that's not the only difference: Unlike Matthew, Luke finishes this passage by mirroring those blessings with a hard-hitting warning:

'But woe to you who are rich, for you have received your consolation ... Woe to you who are full now ... Woe to you who are laughing now ... Woe to you when all speak well of you.'

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This is a fascinating passage – as challenging for us today as it would have been for the gospel's original readers and listeners. With the four Beatitudes, or blessings, Jesus turns the known world on its head, offering us a glimpse of God's kingdom.

But what about those four woes? What a dispiriting way to end this passage – all doom and gloom and punitive consequence. Like much of the Bible, this is a section we would prefer to ignore, passing over it in favour of the far nicer bits.

The Greek word for 'woe', used here by the gospel writer, is: 'ouai'. It's less a curse, far more a lamentation – akin to saying: 'Alas!' And it's a heartfelt expression of grief. In many ways, our English translation fails to capture its complexity.

So, what *are* we to make of Jesus's warnings of woe?

As many in this congregation will know, the summer before last, I gave birth to my first child. My son, Rowan, was born in terrible, dangerous circumstances, before we could get to the nearest hospital. He lived for 39 minutes.

Up until that day, my life – although far from perfect – had felt full of blessing. Not long married, my husband and I were preparing to welcome into our lives and our home a much longed for, much loved child.

Rowan was born, and died, on what should have been an ordinary Wednesday. The following morning, a ghastly nursery rhyme crept into my mind – the one that begins:

*Monday's child is fair of face. Tuesday's child is full of grace.*

*Wednesday's child is full of woe.*

It took a very long time to shake off that phrase, to set myself free from it. First, though, came a succession of long, bleak months – perpetual February, it felt at times, when it was hard to tell up from down, day from night, coming from going. Each Wednesday brought with it a fresh wave of pain.

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Yet over time – as the trauma began to fade, and grief felt less searing – my husband and I began to sense a more complex, nuanced relationship between woe and blessing. Amidst the heartbreak, and through it, we were also discovering strange and unasked for gifts.

Into our lives came new people, new communities, new horizons. The bleakness brought with it a deeper, richer understanding of the world. And, much to our surprise, we were – and are – discovering in ourselves a far deeper capacity for joy.

We are particularly aware of this, now, as we prepare to bring our second child into the world. This is joy made all the more precious for our experience of loss and, yes, of woe.

At Rowan's funeral – which we held here, in this sanctuary – we asked a friend to read a poem: an excerpt from *The Prophet* by Kahlil Gibran. I quote a few lines of it here:

Then a woman said: Speak to us of Joy and Sorrow.

And he answered:

Your joy is your sorrow unmasked.

And the selfsame well from which your laughter rises was oftentimes filled with your tears.

And how else can it be?

The deeper that sorrow carves into your being, the more joy you can contain.

Is not the cup that holds your wine, the very cup that was burned in the potter's oven?

And is not the lute that soothes your spirit, the very wood that was hollowed with knives?

When you are joyous, look deep into your heart, and you shall find it is only that which has given you sorrow that is giving you joy.

When you are sorrowful, look again in your heart, and you shall see that, in truth, you are weeping for that which has been your delight.

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Some of you say, 'Joy is greater than sorrow,' and others say, 'Nay, sorrow is the greater.'

But I say unto you: They are inseparable.

Jesus tells us this much in today's gospel reading. 'Woe to you who are laughing now, for you will mourn and weep.' And yet also: 'Blessed are you who weep now, for you will laugh.' Blessing and woe, laughter and weeping. For my husband and me, joy now sounds in a minor key, but it's no less beautiful for that.

Perhaps you, too, carry within you a story of a life split apart, into 'before' and 'after'. Perhaps it struck you like a bolt of lightning, in a single day. Or perhaps it unfolded over time, so slowly and gradually that you have yet to notice it. Regardless, this is the brokenness that we bring before God: Hearts cracked open, from which woe – and all its blessings – can spill into the world.

For this is nothing less than our story as Christians.

In just a few weeks' time, we will enter the season of Lent. Jesus will leave the mountains and the plains of Galilee, and he will travel south, toward Jerusalem. We, too, we will turn our faces toward that holy city. As we move through the final week of Jesus's life and ministry, grief and woe will become our traveling companions.

And through the depths of Good Friday, we will – at last – come to Easter's joy and resurrection.

In the Christian story, woe is never the last word.

*Wednesday's child is full of woe.*

*Woe to you who are laughing now, for you will mourn and weep.*

*Lia Shimada / 17 February 2019 |*



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Thanks be to God. Amen.