

Date Preached	13-Feb-2022	Date Initiated	01-Feb-2022
Where Preached	SAK	Appointed Readings	Epi 6, Yr C

" Then Jesus looked up at [them] and said, '*Blessèd* are you ... *woe* to you.' "



So, it probably comes as little surprise to any of you that I pray ... and frequently. I have a set of intercessions that I pray every morning during Morning Prayer, which always includes the entire parish prayer list. I pray whenever I receive a message from one of you (or anyone else) about a death or an illness; about a new baby or health restored. I pray before worship ... while writing a sermon ... before meals ... while driving. And, as often as I can, at the beginning of each hour.

And still, I confess, I don't pray as much as I know I should. 'Should,' that is, *not* so much in terms of frequency or depth,¹ but of *subject matter*: I too infrequently place myself, and my own life, before Jesus in prayer. Despite my faith, my training and my vocation, I don't freely and readily put my own personal problems ... hurts I've felt or tough decisions I need to make ... into God's hands. Likewise, in my prayer life, I often neglect thanking God for all the joys and satisfactions that truly abound in my life.

I think this failure is **less** stubborn will or casual inattentiveness ... and **more** my personality: Being an independent, self-reliant, problem-solving type of person (can anyone say, "Type A"?!), I have a tendency to think in terms of my own capabilities. Whatever quandary I may be in, *I* have to think of the solution. Whatever wonderfulness has occurred, I'm more apt to savor the happiness it brings me than I am to thank God as its Source. Unless someone—like my spiritual director or mentor; or, by grace, the Holy Spirit—calls me on this, I may wrestle with a problem all by myself for days or weeks, before I surrender it to God in prayer; or ask God to fill others' lives with joy and peace without pausing to acknowledge how God has so filled my own. My failings in prayer are not (I hope) a matter of hubris or ingratitude, but markers of a disposition that too often leans *away* from Jesus, rather than *toward* Him; that doesn't consistently invite Him to companion my loneliness or adore Him for all the bounty He provides.

** ** *

Today we hear Jesus preaching the version of the Beatitudes² found in the Gospel of St Luke: a briefer, pithier³ version than St Matthew's. The Beatitudes in Luke are also somewhat 'spiky': As in Matthew, Jesus pronounces "blessèd" those who are poor or hungry or who weep or who are hated. But in Luke, He also *denounces*—literally, heaps "woe" upon—those who are rich or satisfied or who laugh or who are well regarded.

¹ Although St Paul does encourage us to "pray without ceasing" (1 Thes 5:17).

² So named for the first word (*beatus*: blessed) in the ancient Vulgate (Latin) translation of this well-known passage.

³ *E.g.*, where, in Matthew, Jesus speaks of the blessedness of the "poor in spirit" and "those who hunger and thirst for righteous," in Luke He speaks about the "poor" and those "who are hungry now."

Now, we're tempted to hear this as a stark pronouncement of divine justice: God will pity those who suffer now, but will inflict those same sufferings on those who are skating through this life. I, however, don't think Jesus is foretelling people's fates here. His message isn't that human existence is some giant wheel of fortune that God never stops spinning⁴: If you're on-top now, you're sure to be at the bottom before too long.⁵ While, throughout Scripture, God's certainly expresses a "preferential option"⁶ for the poor and the abused and the neglected, ↓ God's desire, as consummately expressed in Jesus and the Cross, is for *all* to be fed ... for *all* to be satisfied ... for *all* to be free.

If we look at the whole Gospel of Luke a bit more carefully, we notice the same pronouncements Jesus uses today—"blessing" [μακάριος and "woe" [ούαί]—coming from His mouth repeatedly: almost always to pronounce favor on those who turn to and place their trust in Him ... and to denounce those who doubt or turn away from Him. "Blessèd are those who accept Me; blessèd are those who hear the word of God and obey it."⁷ "But woe to those whose faith is a hollow spectacle or merely superficial; woe to those who cause others to stumble."⁸

This broader look helps us understand that in the Beatitudes, Jesus isn't talking about *fate*, but *faith*: a steadfast Christian disposition ... a prayerful posture that leans *toward* Jesus through *all* the seasons of our lives: the sorrows and wants *and* the joys and satisfactions.⁹ ¶Blessèd are we when we lean toward Jesus by holding Him fully in prayer during the flush seasons and content conditions of our lives ... and woe to us when, brimming with both self-will and self-satisfaction, we succumb to thinking how much we've achieved all by ourselves. ¶Blessèd are we when we lean toward Jesus by falling into His arms in prayer during the fractured, hurting, tender times all of us face ... and woe to us when we despair of having to endure them all alone. ¶Blessèd are we when that awful diagnosis or dreaded phone call drives us right into His arms ... and woe to us if, when the crisis has passed, we sigh with relief and rebuff His embrace, once again.

The "blessings" and "woes" of the Beatitudes in Luke are not some divine scorecard for determining whom God will, ultimately, bless or condemn. Rather, they are Jesus' very personal, very honest sketch of the ever-oscillating existence each one of us lives, every day ... and His imploring us to invite Him into *each* of those days; His calling us to a disposition of faithful and constant prayer, in times of blessing, times of woe ... and all the times in-between.

** ** *

Like any habit or disposition, our 'leaning-toward-ness' must be learned, through practice and repetition. I began this sermon with a candid confession of just how challenging this can be, so let me conclude it with a suggestion of how we might begin: Every day, intentionally set aside five

⁴ This was a not-uncommon conception of human existence in both classical and medieval philosophy.

⁵ I am reminded here of the late medieval Latin poem "O Fortuna" that Carl Orff set to music in his *Carmina Burana*: "O Fortune, | like the moon | you are changeable, | ever waxing | ever waning; | hateful life | first oppresses | and then soothes | playing with mental clarity; | poverty | and power| it melts them like ice."

⁶ To use a phrase from twentieth-century Roman Catholic liberation theology.

⁷ Lk 7:23; 11:28.

⁸ Lk 11:42-43; 17:1.

⁹ I hear Jesus 'channeling' what we hear today from the prophet Jeremiah: Do not trust in mere *mortal* ends, but always and fully in the Lord.

or ten minutes to take your blessings and woes to Jesus, in prayer. As an antidote to the 'woe' of self-satisfied fullness or the myth of 'earned' abundance ... every day, thank Jesus for two or three things you are grateful for in your life; and acknowledge your enjoyment of them as His gift to you. And then, to bless whatever emptiness or grief or indecision you're experiencing, lift up to Jesus two or three things that are vexing you or that you're wrestling with; admit you don't know how to proceed, and ask His guidance. For every time we lean toward Jesus in open, honest, humble prayer, the grace He bestows upon us, in return, binds to the grace at the very center of our souls, and sews us one stitch closer to the Source of our Salvation. "Blessèd" are we, indeed.



*The Rev Douglas S Worthington
St Andrew's Parish
Kent, CT*