

Sermon preached at Gisborne, 13 February 2022

*Lord God, help our hearts to you and hear what you will speak, for you speak peace to your people through Christ, our Lord. Amen.*

Jeremiah 17:5-10; Luke 6:17-26

*Upside-down blessings*

About two weeks ago, in Gisborne Herald, there was a report about emergency housing.<sup>1</sup> The article showed one woman's photo who covered her face with a mask, sunglasses and a beanie. The caption read that the woman feared she would be living out of her car once again after being issued an eviction notice from the motel she was staying at. This woman had three children. The advocates for homeless people said that this incident underlines issues when it comes to emergency housing and the country's ongoing housing crisis. For us who are living in houses, we may not imagine what it is like to live in a car. I thought that the article is quite related to the readings with the theme 'Upside-down blessings.' We will think about it through the sermon on the plain in Luke, blessings by God in Scripture, and our responses to these readings.

*The Sermon on the plain*

The sermon on the plain is a set of teachings of Jesus, and the reading is part of it. While similar teachings in Matthew is called the sermon on the mount, in Luke it is on the plain because Jesus came down from the mountain to a level ground when he delivered this sermon. While standing on a level ground where a great crowd of his disciples and people from all over the places are also standing, Jesus delivers these upside-down blessings that would bless those who are poor, hungry, sad and excluded. A Cuban-American theologian Justo Gonzalez calls these blessings a 'hard-hitting gospel' in that God's good news to the poor is also tough news for those who are not poor. God's reign is not only good news to the poor but also for the well-fed, rich, laughing, and admired, for they have to wake up and change their ways. It is hard-hitting because we can't simply spiritualize it as we do in Matthew 5:3, which reads, "Blessed are the poor in spirit, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven." In Luke, the issues of the poor or

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<sup>1</sup> *Gisborne women ordered to leave motel after rule breaches* by Matthew Rosenberg, Published 01 February 2022 1:48 PM, <https://www.gisborneherald.co.nz/local-news/20220201/system-failure/> Retrieved on 11 February 2022

the disregarded are physical sufferings. For instance, in the parable of *The Rich man and Lazarus*,<sup>2</sup> the rich man is described as the one who overlooked his poor neighbour. His after-life shows that he is in the opposite of the poor Lazarus. In another parable, there is a rich man with huge land. Since the existing barn cannot hold all the produce, he begins to think about building two larger barns to store all. But God has a different plan for him as his life would be demanded that night. Through these parables, Jesus warns them not to be distracted from paying attention to the ways of God. At this stage, questions may arise - does God only love us when we are poor and miserable? Also, is it correct to define the rich and the poor purely based on material possession? For instance, a millionaire may still feel poor and miserable when comparing her/him with a billionaire. In our story time, we can see that the Cratchits were poor materially, but they were able to enjoy the Christmas meal with blessings while rich Scrooge was grumpy and unhappy. Here, Jesus' words work as warning calls for us who fail to see the sufferings of the poor, the hungry, and the disregarded. Further through these upside-down blessings, God is creating a realm where the rich, the happy, and the respected are invited to participate in the sufferings of the poor, the miserable, or the disregarded, and these are true blessings from God.

### *Blessings by God in Scripture*

The reading in Jeremiah 17:5-10 shows what it looks like in the state of being blessed.<sup>3</sup> We often see the Hebrew word *barak* (בָּרַךְ) is translated as 'happy.' But the biblical understanding of 'being happy' is not the same as being 'happy' that we normally express. Happy is the person who trusts in the Lord. They are like trees planted beside a stream. Their leaves are evergreen, they have no fear of the drought, and they continually bear fruit. Those who rely on God live productive lives free from fear. The reading in Jeremiah helps us understand it better.

When Jeremiah prophesied, the Babylonians were expected to come and wreak havoc upon Judah and Jerusalem. The immediate context of the passage involves the strategy of Judah's leaders to form an alliance with Egypt against the Babylonians. Jeremiah's message to Judah and its leaders was to trust in the Lord, not in political and military alliances. As it turned out, the attempt to fight back prompted the Babylonians to tighten their grip, eventually destroying the city and temple and sending the Judeans, including Jeremiah, into exile.

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<sup>2</sup> Luke 16:19-31

<sup>3</sup> בָּרַךְ (*barak*) is – blessed, praised

In the present, we often see that countries regularly form alliances, sign treaties, and cooperate both militarily and for trade and commerce. Even so, there remain issues in that those involved parties may overlook the ethical and moral dimensions of these alliances. For Israel, to whom God was the true King, the alliance sought by Judah together with their ongoing sins undermined their covenantal relationship with God.

Therefore, the hearers of the prophecy may have seen the meaning of the totality of the Babylonians' invasion. It not only showed that God was certainly involved in the coming of the Babylonians by using them as an instrument of God's judgement and punishment against the ongoing offences of the people of Judah. Even so, the people have been given a chance to return to God who created them, freed them from slavery and gave them the land they inhabit. How would people respond? I often hear people say how God, as the love of all loves, can punish God's people. But the real punishment was not the sufferings under Babylonians but the void state of hearts and minds that had no one to rely on but themselves.

### *Upside-down blessings*

Gisborne district councillor Meredith Akuhata-Brown is a vocal advocate for homeless people in the city and agrees the need is only increasing. For her, housing is the priority in our nation. Mrs Akuhata-Brown said homelessness and transient housing was particularly hard on children, and one of the worst cases she'd seen was a child who'd attended 22 different schools by the time he was in Year 7. "These kids live in a highly anxious (environment) . . . are we going to be here for a long time? Is it our house? Am I allowed to put a picture on the wall?" "You put a dynamic of nervous . . . anxious . . . angry . . . sad . . . in a little person, who just has to suck it up and get over it."<sup>4</sup>

This story is deeply disturbing for us who believe in God's blessings. We as one of citizens in Gisborne may not be able to work for the poor or the disregarded with physical resources and power. Each individual may also have financial difficulties or things to deal with in our lives. Even so, Jesus invites us to come and see their sufferings, share their sadness and misery, and weep for them because it is how we are being blessed. Scrooge was a changed man on Christmas Day after he met three Christmas Spirits. He began to share things with his neighbours. We who are living in these blessings also work for the suffering neighbours through the means and prayers no matter how small or insignificant they are. In doing so, we

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<sup>4</sup> *Gisborne Herald*, 01 February 2022

realize that we are truly blessed in God's kingdom because God is our true alliance, and we are not alone. Amen.