

Luke 6:17-26

He went down with them and stood on a level place. A large crowd of his disciples was there and a great number of people from all over Judea, from Jerusalem, and from the coastal region around Tyre and Sidon,¹⁸ who had come to hear him and to be healed of their diseases. Those troubled by impure spirits were cured,¹⁹ and the people all tried to touch him, because power was coming from him and healing them all.

²⁰Looking at his disciples, he said: 'Blessed are you who are poor, for yours is the kingdom of God.

²¹Blessed are you who hunger now, for you will be satisfied.

Blessed are you who weep now, for you will laugh.

²²Blessed are you when people hate you, when they exclude you and insult you and reject your name as evil, because of the Son of Man.

²³'Rejoice in that day and leap for joy, because great is your reward in heaven. For that is how their ancestors treated the prophets.

²⁴'But woe to you who are rich, for you have already received your comfort.

²⁵Woe to you who are well fed now, for you will go hungry.

Woe to you who laugh now, for you will mourn and weep.

²⁶Woe to you when everyone speaks well of you, for that is how their ancestors treated the false prophets.

Blessings and Woes

My favourite of Pixar's animated films is *Ratatouille*. It follows the fortunes of Remy, a rat who lives with his clan in the attic of an old woman in a house outside Paris — until she finds the rats and drives them out with her shotgun. Remy is separated from his family as they escape but finds himself in Paris, and at the restaurant once run by Auguste Gusteau, a great chef. Remy dreams of being a chef and he has a certain genius for it. But he's a rat. Enter Alfredo Linguini, the new *plongeur* — he can't cook at all, but fate conspires to have them meet, Remy guides Linguini in how to cook — don't make me explain how that works — and Linguini is credited with being an inspirational chef in no time, while Skinner, the sell-out new chef-proprietor is brought down to earth. It's a great story, beautifully told, and the soundtrack is great too.

And it's the perfect rags to riches story — both Remy and Linguini rise above their lowly station, and Skinner gets his comeuppance.

And that's also the theme of Luke's telling of Jesus's beatitudes, in a way — blessings to the underdog, woe to those secure in their power and comfort. Matthew's may be the better known, coming as it does at the beginning of the sermon on the mount. But Luke is far more direct, and packs more punch. According to Luke not only does Jesus promise blessing for the poor, the hungry, the weeping, the hated and rejected — but he also promises woe to the rich, the well fed, the carefree and the broadly popular people. No beating about the bush here.

Almost as an aside, this was particularly daring of Luke, because Luke wrote his gospel in Rome, apparently under the sponsorship of a wealthy patron — Theophilus. So Luke was being paid by a wealthy Christian man to write the gospel, but nonetheless he filled it with lots of warnings about the dangers of wealth. Talk about fearless and uncompromising!

Again, before getting into the meat of this passage, pay attention to the context — if you have a Bible nearby, open it to Luke 6. We're not very deep into Luke's gospel, but at this point Jesus had already healed an outcast leper, and a paralysed man, and many others, and also been challenged by the Pharisees for picking grain in a field on the sabbath, and for not keeping the traditional purity laws. So those remarks, first of blessing to the rejected, and secondly of woe to the popular continues what Jesus has already set about doing: blessing the outcasts but also breaking ranks with those who held a grip on conventional thinking.

Conventional thinking was far from perfect. When Jesus says woe to you when everyone speaks well of you he is observing that if you fit in too well to an imperfect society, you just aren't trying hard enough to make it better.

What is particularly important here is the idea that the majority, if they think about what God thinks, probably think God approves of them, and what they approve of. You know: in any war God is on *our* side; in any debate God is on *our* side.

No — Jesus gives his best shot at exploding these comfortable views of God. *We* know that Jesus is like that: we hear this in the context of the cross and the resurrection, we hear it after

having heard the sermon on the mount before, we hear it knowing that Christianity has challenged human behaviour and reshaped it, century by century. We know not only that Jesus shocked the people of his day, but in his wake Christianity reshaped the Roman empire, civilised Europe (gradually, over centuries), ended approval for slavery, was part of the end of colonialism and the rise of 'woke' — which is the rapidly increasing attention paid to the needs and feelings of minorities in whatever form — originally among black Americans, but now also among all other minorities.

As I say, we know that Jesus can be challenging, and we know that this new perspective is a very radical wisdom, confounding the wisdom of some, and looking like foolishness to many. The challenge for us may be to continue to hear the challenge, and then hear his challenge to us ourselves, and not to our favourite enemy.

For example: it is very easy for me to point to the United States and be scandalised that their far-right, nationalistic government is supported by so many Christians. Shouldn't they be advocating for immigrants? Shouldn't they be advocating for medicare and all the programmes that help the poor, the immigrant, those generally in need? Yes, they should, and shame on them.

But what is much much harder is for me to do is to look at the resources I have available to me and to my family — wealth that marks me as being in the global top few percent — and then to hear Jesus's condemnation of wealth. Why is wealth so bad? Because it marks a lack of empathy for those who have less than I. I have the means to help, but I only go so far. Perhaps you feel the same. I have an argument in my head that says, 'yes, but I have children, and I need to feed and clothe and educate them, and help them get set up in life.' And I do. And in the end, how I work that out is my business and God's. But I do hear Jesus challenging me about how generous I should be. Because Jesus does *not* stipulate an '*ordo amoris*', an order for loving, as you may have heard in the news recently, in debate between JD Vance and Rory Stewart, and the Pope. The challenge of Jesus is *not* to settle back into concentric circles of love, prioritising yourself and your family and your neighbours — but precisely to hear this passage for what it means, and the good Samaritan for what it means. It is to recognise that love reaches out, extends its empathy, and treats the distant as if they were really close.

I talked about Ratatouille at the beginning. This film is a fantasy of talent being recognised and allowed to flourish — even in a rat. Dare to translate that into modern discussion of privilege and opportunity. It's very Luke 6 Blessings and Woes-ish.

You may be challenged by Luke 6 in different ways. The important thing is to hear the comfort in the blessings, or hear the challenge in the woes, and not brush them aside, but allow Jesus's words to change you, to open your heart wider to God's great love for you, and to your capacity to love more widely still.

Amen.