

Sermon 3rd before Lent 6th in Ordinary

Jeremiah 17:5-8, 1 Corinthians 15:12, 16-20, Luke 6:17, 20-26

I suspect that many of you like myself have been enthralled by the BBC series *The Green Planet*. If you haven't seen it I would recommend you do – it is of course on "I player" and has been broadcast each Sunday night. Covering different worlds of plant from desert to rain forest to water and human plant-scapes such as orchards and the like. Some of the ingenious ways plants survive is truly awesome to use that dreadful word in the right way.

Trees and plants that interconnect with each other to produce toxins if there's a nasty critter munching one trees leaves warning the others off before it arrives. Trees growing deep roots that connect with each other so that if one finds itself short of water it can draw upon the help of another. Quite remarkable stuff. What's this got to do with the gospel? Well we are in the heart of mission narratives in our scriptural readings: How the body of the church nurtures supports and grows for the benefit of existing members and all people. We are to embody and proclaim the love and desire of God to reconcile creation and mankind to himself and his kingdom values.

The image in Jeremiah of the blessed man being one who places his trust in God being like a tree planted by a watercourse is clear and powerful – but the watercourse can be seen as the community of faith, the church holding together, supporting each other as those amazing plants and trees in *Attenborough's* films do. They are not shielded from hardship but together they endure and overcome. So yes it is a metaphor of mission both for the person and for the growth of the community.

Now today's gospel is known as the beatitudes: they appear in Matthew and in Luke which we have today. They are a bit different in Luke and we'll come to that in a moment. The word beatitude by which they are known comes from blessing. Blessed are the poor and so on. Our translation here is happy – it's not one that makes me entirely happy as some of you know. Happy and blessed have different rings to them, happy seems a tad superficial to me. Such is the problem of language and translation.

I remember telling some of you about my Landrover journey with a couple of Royal Marines in Senegal some years ago. On our way through some little villages to our jungle training ground. One of the marines was a gloomy soul the other a blunt Yorkshireman. Marine Gloom said to me: “padre why are these people so happy? Look at them their houses clothes and lives what have they got to be happy about.” The other said before I could answer: “I’d leave you here so you’d learn ‘somin’ but then you might drag ‘em into your misery.” The people seemed poor, but not destitute with simple homes and as I found out on the Sunday great food.

Much of what is important in life is how we see things. The joy of David Attenborough series is getting us to see plants differently. Jesus fixes upon the disciples because they are the ones called to mission and therefore to see things differently if worldly values are to be transformed by kingdom values. Those two marines saw the same village with very different eyes. The beatitudes in Matthew and in Luke do the same.

Luke’s beatitudes are a tad different to Matthew. There are 4 rather than 8 and we also have the woes. Woe to you who just see things and treasure them as the world does! It will pass with your life.

Did you notice how the first beatitude is an *IS* and the next three are *SHALLs*. Blessed are you who are poor – yours *IS* the kingdom of God. How odd that poverty *is* the beginning of all the other states of happiness or blessedness. Well of course such poverty pointed to by Christ is not destitution all humans deserve their basic needs and the labourer deserves his keep.

Elsewhere St. Paul says that we (Christians) possess nothing and yet have everything. In worldly law that is nonsense. I own my shoes my car, my house etc. In kingdom values everything is on trust and does not belong to us – “we brought nothing into the world and take nothing out” So what is possessed becomes gift and grace. Some poor and not so poor may spend a life obsessively wishing for the lottery win – perhaps that is why Matthew adds poor in spirit. Christ never made a poor man rich. He heals deprivation, blindness, deafness, unforgiving hearts and much else but not poverty. But he was always aware of need, the feeding of the 5000 and wedding at Cana might come to mind.

God is our beginning and our end and poverty is not just material, but neither is it just spiritual detachment from worldly goods. The beatitudes in Matthew and here in Luke mess with our minds in a holy sense. They tell us to see things differently to wrestle with our consciences – not to accept a worldly status quo or common view.

What has this to do with mission? Mission is about doing but it starts with an inner attitude or relation to God and thereby to his creation and fellow human beings. We could see the poor, those who mourn, hunger and are despised as people to pity and help. We could see mission as just something to do for others. But as always Christ jumbles it up and kingdom values break through our order like weeds and then trees breaking up concrete and reclaiming the landscape for creation.

St. John Chrysostom says: *If we provide for the poor let us regard ourselves as the recipients. Anyone who will find it difficult to give in this way will find it difficult to give at all....think not of what you lose but what you gain. So it is with every act of virtue.* Or as one of our housebound members put it reflecting on volunteering in a hospice with the disfigured and dying – she always received much more than she gave.

The Cross, total self-giving, is planted in the middle of a self centred world a barren landscape. But it flourishes and offers not blessedness in this life but eternity because it is planted in the heart of God. Next time you see a little weed bursting up through the crack in the concrete think on that just a while, and be happy before you try to restore world order again.