

17 February 2018
Epiphany VI
St Luke 6: 17 - 24

This passage is, of course, quite similar to the version we find in St Matthew's gospel, better known to many of us as the Beatitudes. Similar, but in some ways it is very different. The theme is the same - blessed are the poor, but the verses are slightly different, and so is the setting. In Matthew's gospel it is the beginning of a very long passage known as the Sermon on the Mount. Here, the Lord is standing on what St Luke tells us is a level place, and he is surrounded by a great number of people, all crowding in to hear him.

There is also something significantly different. In Matthew, Jesus says 'blessed are the poor', but here in Luke a different word is used which translates from the Greek - blessed are you poor people. That is very significant for us. That word poor is spelled differently: P T O C H I A. The first word that came to my mind as I read it and then tried to say it was pterodactyl - those huge flying dinosaurs from several million years ago. The "P" at the beginning of the word is silent.

But in proper Greek pronunciation, both the P and the T are pronounced, and as gross as it sounds, it reminds us a bit of someone who has a bad hacking cough. In short, Jesus is saying, "blessed are you poor people who are spit upon." Blessed are you who are poor and treated with disregard.

Our first response would be to recoil from such an image, because spitting at or on another person is a sign of absolute disrespect and contempt. It is repulsive. To be a participant in such an incident almost turns our stomach. It is meant to reduce a fellow human being into an object such as a sidewalk or road - something beneath our feet. For most of us, this is so despicable it is beyond our comprehension, and we cannot even imagine a situation where we would be involved in it, either on the giving or receiving end. But there is far more to it than a contemptible, repulsive act.

As we study this passage, perhaps another frightening thought comes to us: We are the fortunate ones because, for the most part, we have sufficient goods and food, clean water, education, and medical care, love and respect to more than meet our needs. We're the ones who are well-filled in this passage. We are the ones who are free to laugh. We are treated with recognition and respect. Standing against it is the warning that a tremendous reversal is coming. That should be alarming and frightening when we realize the plight of others.

Let's begin by looking at this passage in the context of the era. Jesus is in the northern region of Israel, in Galilee, which was, for the most part, open territory. It was the meeting place of the great trade caravans, and the people were a mixture of Jews and Gentiles, and all nationalities. It was rugged

territory, and the Romans had a very difficult time maintaining control over the people. When they did send out a patrol, the soldiers were wary and quick to react, and in turn, abusive. The people were abused - forced to pay bribes, forced to hand over their food and provide housing for the soldiers, and the soldiers seemed to take sadistic delight in making life miserable for the inhabitants. And when the people balked at the abuse, the Romans spit on them. Even when they complied, the Romans treated them with contempt.

The time is coming, Jesus said, when this will change. That happened some 30 years later, but in a brutal and horrible way with the first Jewish Revolt that left tens of thousands of people dead.

When we briefly look at history, we see countless examples of those in power abusing those who attempted to survive under them. We need look back only three quarters of a century to see the worst of humanity in the holocaust in much of Europe, or the oppression of the Chinese, first by the Japanese invaders, and then their own leaders. We saw the abuses of the Russian Orthodox Church over their people, and in the Russian Revolution the churches were attacked. But then the Soviet Union's oppression of anyone who dared to openly express their faith.

We must also look at similar stories from our own country - the treatment of people of colour, of immigrants beginning with the Irish in the 1800s on to the people from central and Latin America today; the treatment of women, minorities, gays and lesbians. People with any sort of visible or invisible limitation. Those who are old, young, have the wrong accent or live in the wrong zip code. The homeless, the mentally ill, the chemically addicted, the under-employed. And the list goes on and on. We don't spit on them, but we can be just as inhumane with words and actions intended to demean, hurt, and reduce others to objects of scorn.

Quite recently, the spectre of racism has appeared again in the forms of tales of people wearing blackface. Whether they were being racist or not, it is still the equivalent of spitting on others different from themselves. Whether in ignorance, jest, or sheer nastiness - it hurt.

For the most part, our behaviour has improved. We are somewhat less physically abusive now than in the past, but perhaps it is in part because there are security cameras everywhere, and millions of smart phones where people are willing and able to record and broadcast examples of abusive behaviour. Gradually, we are making it unacceptable to physically abuse what Jesus called the poor people who are spit upon.

We've cleaned up our language and avoid using all sorts of slurs and demeaning labels, at least in public. I think that started with the Solidarity Movement in Gdansk in the 1980s. Remember all of the

Polish jokes that used to circulate, and then suddenly, when Lech Walesa and his fellow union members stood up to the abuses of their government, we realized how wrong we had been and quit. And after that, our language and what was acceptable and unacceptable began to change. But all of the laws in the world, and all of the public shaming of repugnant language and behaviour cannot change attitudes. We may not kick a homeless person sleeping on the street or blocking our way, we might not say anything inappropriate, but the question remains about our attitude. And we remember the warning of Jesus - if you start thinking about murdering someone or committing adultery or breaking any of the other Commandments, then it is as if you have already done the wicked deed.

There is something else for everyone to keep in mind. When someone is abusive in thought, word, or deed, they have lost their self respect and the respect of others.

A number of years ago there was a very elegant person, or so I thought, who one evening announced she was a member of Political Party A and could not tolerate the presence of anyone of Political Parties B, C, D, and so on. She ranted that they looked dumb, they smelled bad, they were worthless slugs. I heard her talk, and after a few moments realized she was far from elegant. She had demeaned herself with this cold, heartless, thoughtless attitude.

When we read this passage we notice is something is missing. Jesus did not say that one day God was going to see the plight of the people who are spit upon, and go back to some good old Old Testament smiting and smoting of the evil-doers. When we find that part missing, it almost always means that Jesus is letting his disciples - that includes us - that it is our responsibility to do God's work and be the agents of change.

If this season of Epiphany is to have any real meaning - taking God's word into the world - then our responsibility is far greater than talk. It begins with examining our attitude toward everyone around us. Then it moves into action. It is action - action that clearly states you are my brother and sister, even when I don't necessarily like you today. It is action that raises up all people so they can experience the fullness of the human spirit God has placed in their heart. It is action that creates, not destroys hope. In the 1920s when Hemingway and Gertrude Stein worked closely together, she received and criticized a piece he had written. She didn't think the ending was right and told him, An author must always leave the reader with hope. Good literary advice, but far more important, it is the teaching of Jesus - to be instruments of hope in the lives of others.